STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

10¢
FEB. 11, 1939

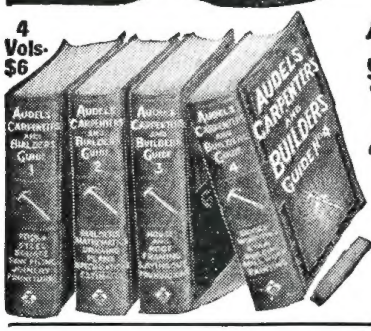
RANGE ORPHAN

A Full Length Novel

By

WALT COBURN

BUILDERS TRADE GUIDES



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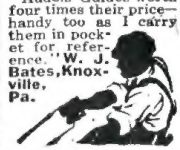

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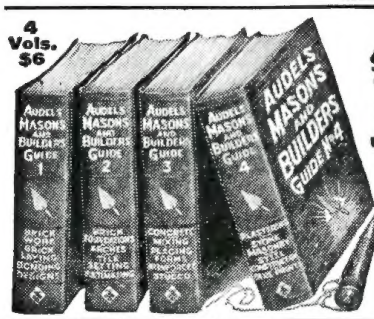

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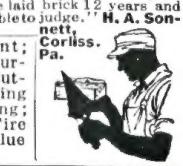

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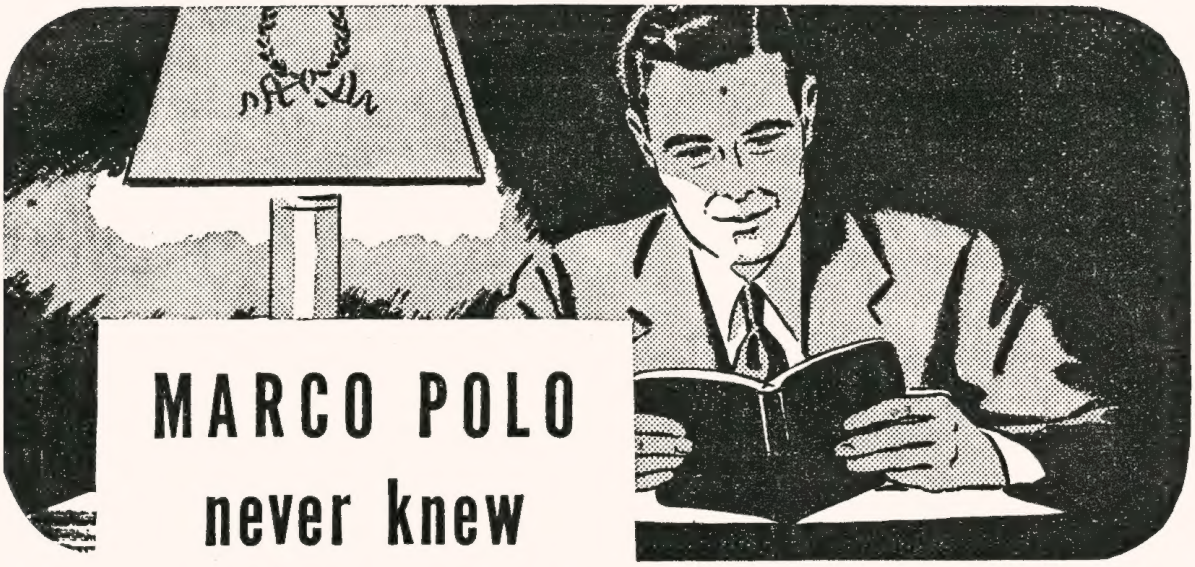

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Vol. CLXXI Contents for February 11, 1939 No. 4

A FULL-LENGTH NOVEL

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THIS MAGAZINE CONTAINS NEW STORIES ONLY. NO REPRINTS ARE USED.

All characters used in fiction and semi-fiction stories in this magazine are fictitious. Any similarity in name or characterization to persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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THE ROUNDUP

WE are reprinting three letters below, picked from the many which come to our desk regularly, concerning the editorial content of the magazine. These letters have to do, primarily, with the illustrations in Western Story, and there seems to be no doubt about it that Eggenhofer ranks tops with our readers wherever they may come from! This naturally, is gratifying, for we've long felt that when it comes to depicting the Western scene, there's no one quite like Nick, and we're heartily glad so many of our readers feel the same. But to the letters:

"This is the first squawk I've ever made about your magazine," writes Ross Weyh, a reader from Havre, Montana, "but I just got to wondering what happened to the fellow that used to illustrate your stories. I think those illustrations were good and really authentic. But after you've lived in the West the illustrations in your October 22nd issue were terrible! Those men didn't really look like cowboys at all. I think the rest of your magazine is fine, but please give us more of those story heads by Eggenhofer."

And from Walt Lee, of Los Angeles, California:

"Having read your magazine for more years than I have patience to figure out, and speaking as an artist, I just have to chuck in a beef on your art of late. Your old artist —I can't make out his name—is the only artist who gets the old business of the West in his work—and how! I've lived here in the West for fifty years and recognize real Western atmosphere!

Lee Starnes, of St. Joseph, Missouri, has this to say:

"I wish to take this opportunity to express to you my appreciation of the splendid illustrations by Nick Eggenhofer. His pictures are perfect in draftsmanship and alive with dramatic action and interest. Personally, his pictures sell your magazine to me, as they have a quality unequaled in any other Western publication. These illustrations added to the best of authors make a combination that is unbeatable.

Eggenhofer is not only a brilliant but a conscientious artist. We've known him for a long time and are thoroughly familiar with the manner in which he works. A drawing always has to be *right* with Nick. He puts in many hours of research to make sure that every scene he depicts is correct even to the smallest detail. But it is because he knows and loves the cattle country that he is able to instill the spirit of the open range in his illustrations. He was on one of his numerous jaunts in the Southwest at the time Mr. Weyh and Mr. Lee mention, but we are glad to tell you that he is back again, hard at work, and you will see more and more of his work in Western Story.

Eggenhofer has had a picturesque and colorful life. Born in Ganting, Bavaria, the first magazines he ever read were the old Street & Smith Buffalo Bill weeklies. These stirring accounts of high adventure

fired him with a desire to know the vast plains country himself, so, at the age of fifteen, he came to America. Nick tells us how he "struggled fiercely" trying to learn English, how he drifted from one job to another, until finally he landed with a lithograph company in New York. He had already made up his mind to be an artist—a Western artist—and so he rounded out his busy life in the New World by going to Cooper Union nights studying art.

It was about this time that Western Story first appeared on the stands. During his spare time Nick had worked hard at his drawings. He saw the art director at Street & Smith and, his feeling for the West recognized, was given some stories to illustrate. He's been with us ever since and Western Story has always been proud to have his colorful drawings on its pages.

Nick lives with his wife and small daughter in a log cabin in the New Jersey hills. He makes many trips to the West, renewing old friendships and collecting material for his work. His hobbies include riding, fishing, and hunting, and he allows that he dotes on "poking around secondhand shops and old book stores."

He collects authentic Western gear and Indian costumes, and his studio, which we've been fortunate enough to see, is a veritable museum. He likes to build stagecoach and wagon models and when it comes to playing the guitar and singing old-time range ballads, Nick is, like always, tops! Two things get on his nerves, however, and they, he assures us solemnly, are "swing music and—editors and such." Well, we didn't hear that last, but the next time we see Nick it will be a case of just one hombre meeting another to make medicine!

This week we inaugurate our new policy of using much longer stories in Western Story Magazine. Walt Coburn is our curtain-raiser with a top-notch yarn entitled RANGE ORPHAN which begins on page 9. We'd appreciate it if you'd drop us a line and let us know what you think of these feature book-length novels.

In next week's big issue—

A full-length thrill-packed mystery novel by Tom Roan entitled FUNERAL MOUNTAIN. A Chinese Buddha hidden high in the impenetrable Sierras was certainly the last thing Phil Seldon ever expected to see, but there were more surprises waiting for him—and not all of them were pleasant—when he took up the trail of those murdering mail thieves. Potluck Jones is back again! It didn't take the famous range detective long to tie the rustling trouble on the Park Range to the dude rancher who had such funny ideas about cow nursing. But his method of dealing with the problem is so strange it will leave you gasping. Read about it in THE MAKING OF A BUCKAROO, a salty novel by Ney N. Geer. Though Carse Corbus' backtrail was shrouded in mystery, the T Down crew was willing to give him a chance to do the job they'd fallen down on. When Carse got into action, though, they almost regretted their decision. That old-timer, Harry F. Olmsted, is the author of this gripping action tale entitled SMOKY JUDGMENT DAY. Besides these smashing yarns, there'll be other stories by Eugene P. Dutcher, Kenneth Gilbert, another installment of ACES COME HIGH, by Jackson Gregory, an interesting article on the Bullard rifle by Phil Sharpe, and many other features.

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(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

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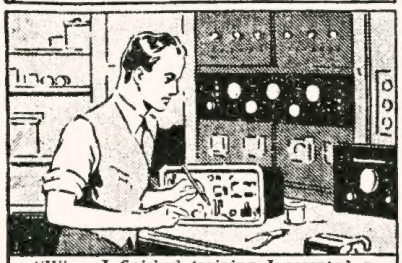

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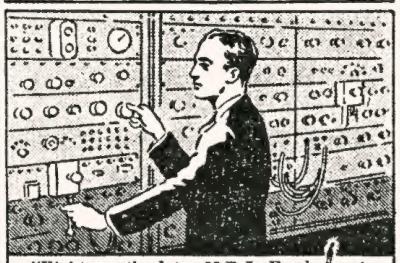

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UNKNOWN

UNKNOWN is a new Street & Smith magazine. The first issue, on sale February 10, will contain a 50,000-word novel by Eric Frank Russell plus another 40,000 words of shorter stories. Russell's book-length novel is a classic that will be referred to for a decade to come. It is a fantasy, founded on fact. You will be thrilled by every word of this new 160-page magazine, which sells at 20 cents the copy, because it represents something new in fiction.

RANGE ORPHAN

By WALT COBURN

Range Orphan

CHAPTER I

WAITING FOR A SHOWDOWN

AFTER the last beating his stepfather, Tom Dwyer, gave him, young Skeeter Roberts had taken the few dollars he had away and bought himself a second-hand six-shooter. He aimed to use it if Tom tackled him again.

Skeeter told himself that a feller could stand just about so much punishment, that was all. It would take only one .45 slug in the belly to kill even a big two-hundred-pound tough hand like Tom Dwyer.

Skeeter was fourteen and small for his age. Ranch raised, many of his thoughts and ways were those of an old cowhand. He savvied cattle and horses, brands and earmarks, better than he did school books and kid games. Ranch life was robbing the kid of his boyhood, but he didn't realize it, except in a vague, half-understanding way.

Skeeter liked to fool around with a green two-year-old bronc. Few men could rope better than he. Cowpunchers who had worked for his father, Harry Roberts, who had ramrodded the Turkey Track outfit for fifteen-twenty years till he got killed, said that Skeeter came by his cow-savvy natural. Till a rustler bullet cut him down, there wasn't a better cowhand in Arizona than Harry Roberts.

Harry's widow had married Tom Dwyer, a big, swaggering, good-looking cowpuncher with a reputation as a bronc-peeler and fast cowhand. Tom had a way with women, too, and nobody wondered much when the Widow Roberts married him a year or so after Harry Roberts got killed. She had a ten-year-old kid to think about, and Tom Dwyer had a little spread on the Mexican border that he made pay.

Even Skeeter had been fooled at first by Tom Dwyer's big-mouthed hoorawing and joshing that passed for good-fellowship among men who were not smart enongh to see the ornery streak underneath. When Tom Dwyer was sparking the Widow Roberts who was working in a little restaurant in the border town of Nogales, he had gotten on the boy's good side by buying him candy and giving him a pony to ride around town.

It wasn't until after Skeeter's mother died of pneumonia that Tom Dwyer had started to bear down hard on the boy. He took Skeeter out of school and put him to work on the ranch, loading him down with all chores that the cowpunchers wouldn't do, like building fence and adobe sheds and cooking. There would be weeks on end when Skeeter never got a chance to throw his saddle on a horse. And no matter how well the kid did a job, the only thanks or praise he ever got was a cussing or a slap across the face or a kick in the pants.

Skeeter, young as he was, was cowhand enough to know what was going on. Tom Dwyer was trailing now with five or six cowpunchers who were hard citizens. They were working south of the Mexican line, fetching out cattle they rustled down there, and slipping them over the border at night.

They were getting bolder, more reckless all the time. Lately they had begun stealing horses on this side of the border, working the brands and swapping the stolen horses to Mexicans or American ranchers who had outfits down below. After a successful deal of this

kind Tom Dwyer and his renegade pardners would get drunk at the ranch and play poker all night. Sometimes the drinking session would last a week. Skeeter would be yanked out of bed in the middle of the night to cook them a big supper that they'd only half eat, or to ride to town to fetch them more whiskey and tequila.

Skeeter picked up a lot of information from what he heard of their drunken arguments and plans. Then, a couple of weeks ago, when he was washing up a mess of dirty dishes, Tom Dwyer had gotten a notion, either the product of his own whiskey-warped brain or something said by one of the renegades, that the boy was doing too much listening.

He had beaten the boy senseless, then thrown him, unconscious, into the cellar where they kept such garden truck as cabbage and carrots and turnips and potatoes. He and the others were gone when Skeeter regained consciousness hours later. They had pulled out for Mexico, taking with them a bunch of horses they had recently stolen.

They were due back now, after two weeks down yonder. They would be coming back with more Mexican cattle. Skeeter had been practicing with the old long-barreled six-shooter, using some of Tom's big supply of cartridges, until he could hit a tin can fifty or sixty feet away almost every shot. That was shooting straight enough to hit a man of Tom Dwyer's big build, he told himself.

ABOUT dusk, Skeeter put his saddle on the best horse in Tom Dwyer's T D brand, Zebra, a big line-backed dun that would pack a kid his weight plumb north to the Canadian line without turning a hair. He took a ride that brought him back to the ranch by nine o'clock. Then he staked out the saddled horse about a quarter of a mile down the creek where nobody was likely to find the animal.

He oiled and cleaned his six-shooter, and began his vigil. He had sighted Tom Dwyer and the others fetching a big drive of cattle through Pack Saddle Pass. He reckoned they would be showing up about midnight.

Skeeter had to force down a big meal of jerky, beans and dutch-oven sour-dough bread. Excitement and something that he reckoned must be plain fear had kept him from feeling hungry. But if he got into a fight with Tom Dwyer as he reckoned he would, he'd need grub in his belly when he hit the trail. Or if he got killed, he told himself, trying to grin, he'd die with a full belly, anyhow.

Once, at Nogales, he had heard a tinhorn gambler say that he always shaved and took a bath before he sat into a big game. Then, he explained, if there came up a gun argument and he booked himself a losing, he'd make a clean-looking corpse. So Skeeter had taken a bath and trimmed his shock of straw-colored hair as best he could.

He studied himself in the cracked mirror in the little adobe cabin where he slept. He saw a freckled, tanned face, blunt-jawed, short-nosed, wide-mouthed, a pair of gray-blue eyes under straight, sun-bleached brows. He wished he was old enough to grow a mustache and he especially wished that his hair and eyes were black and that his nose was hawk-beaked instead of blunt with a lump on it where Tom's fist had busted it two weeks ago. He wanted to look like a tall, rangy-built Texan he had seen once at Nogales, a Texan the men called Lon Lonigan.

Lon held the world's steer-roping record and was said to be the world's champion cowboy. Lonigan had killed a man or two, had been a Texas Ranger, and had even gone to Europe with the Buffalo Bill show. Lonigan was Skeeter's ideal cowpuncher. He was everything the boy dreamed of being.

"You damn tow-headed, pug-nosed runt," he snarled at his reflection in the cracked mirror. "You're a hell of a lookin' specimen."

Even his nickname, Skeeter, rankled. He cussed it with all the words he knew in his own language and the Mexican tongue that he spoke like a native. Who, he asked his reflection in the mirror, ever heard of a ranger or a notorious outlaw or a champion roper or bronc-stomper named Skeeter? And in every dime novel he had ever read the hero had black hair and piercing black eyes and was tall, wide-shouldered and slim-waisted.

"You damn tow-headed, blue-eyed runt. Freckled like a cow belched bran in your face. You make a fine-lookin' tough hand. *Skeeter!* Hell of a name for an outlaw!"

He blew out the candle and went outside where he rolled and lit a brown-paper cigarette. He found a half-emptied bottle of tequila and tried to take a drink, but the fiery stuff burned his throat and choked him so that he coughed and spat it out.

Tom Dwyer had encouraged rather than censored Skeeter's smoking. But he couldn't stomach tequila or whiskey. Tom had gotten him drunk once on beer and he had been so sick afterward that he had never been able to take the stuff since without gagging, though he tried again and again. Skeeter wanted to be tough.

He heard the sound of shod hoofs and hid in the brush along the creek. He wasn't doing any more cooking for Tom and his renegades. He'd cooked their last meal for them, fetched them their last liquor from Nogales, taken the last of their drunken abuse. He was bushed-up, his gun ready. No man could beat him up the way Tom Dwyer had done and keep on living long.

Skeeter was putting into practice all the tough lore, the hard-bitten border code of the hard citizens who packed guns and rode the dim trails. He was heading for the outlaw trail. He was killing Tom Dwyer for a starter. He'd build himself a tough rep like that notorious New Mexico outlaw, Billy the Kid. He pinched out the coal of his cigarette and as he crouched in the black shadows, he hummed the song the cow country had made up about that tough young outlaw.

"Oh, Billy the Kid was an outlaw for fair,
He could ride any bronco that ever wore hair.
He packed his two six-shooters low on his thigh,
Killed twenty-one tough men before he did die!"

CHAPTER II

MURDER

SKEETER watched for half a dozen men to ride up out of the night. But Tom Dwyer rode alone. He came up at a long trot, halting at the barn. Skeeter knew he would saddle a fresh horse before he went to the house. The gun butt was cold in the moist palm of Skeeter's hand. Tom looked almighty big and dangerous. It was hard to believe that a bullet could kill a man who was that tough.

In a few moments, Tom came from the barn. He had taken off his chaps and walked with the stiff-

legged gait of a cowpuncher who has spent the past twenty-four hours in the saddle. He was carrying his saddle gun in the crook of his left arm.

This was Skeeter's chance. He could kill Tom Dwyer from ambush. He held the six-shooter in both hands. His nerves were unsteady and the long gun barrel wouldn't steady down. He laid it across a branch of the big mesquite that screened him. But he couldn't pull the trigger. He couldn't murder the man he feared and hated. The son of Harry Roberts wasn't of a bushwhacker breed. He took a deep breath of relief when Tom went into the adobe house and was lost in the darkness.

Tom Dwyer never lit a lamp until he had closed the door and pulled down the blinds. Else some bushwhacker enemy might pot him. Caution had long ago become a habit with Tom. Skeeter saw the door close, heard Tom's harsh voice inside the house bellowing his name.

"You Skeeter whelp! Come alive and rustle some grub. You damn no account, roundsidin' lazy young whelp! Rattle your hocks! I ain't et a square meal in a week. Where in hell you hidin', you tow-headed young coyote?"

Tom had gone in by way of the kitchen. Skeeter, crouched in the brush, heard muffled sounds as the man yanked open the trapdoor to the cellar. Tom was remembering, Skeeter reckoned with grim satisfaction, that he'd left the boy down there battered and unconscious.

After a minute or two he heard doors banging and knew that Tom was searching the two bedrooms of the low-roofed adobe house. Then Tom came outside from another door and bellowed the boy's name in a voice that had alarm and vicious anger mingled in its raucous tone. He went back to the barn. In a minute or two he came out cursing Skeeter for a runaway, ungrateful whelp. He'd discovered that the boy's saddle was gone. Then he went back to the house, going in by way of the kitchen door again.

Skeeter wanted to slip down the creek, fork his saddled horse and clear out without letting Tom Dwyer see him. But he fought down that impulse. He had promised himself that he would meet the man face to face and kill him. But the job seemed appalling now. Tough men had tried to kill Tom, and he had beaten them to the draw. Tom had three notches on the cedar-handled six-shooter he packed.

Skeeter broke out in a cold sweat at the thought of walking across the moonlit clearing, shoving open the kitchen door and shooting at Tom's brisket. Tom would hear him coming. He'd have a gun in his hand when Skeeter pushed open the door. And Tom Dwyer didn't shoot to miss.

Inside the adobe Tom was rattling the stove lids and starting a fire. Fixing to get his own damn supper. Let 'im. Let the big ox rustle his own bait. There wasn't a bite of cooked grub in the house. Nary a drink left in the jug in the cupboard. The big bully would find his jug of whiskey busted, out back. The three bottles of tequila Skeeter had found he had emptied, thrown away on the pile with other empty bottles and cans. Tom Dwyer, when he found there wasn't a drink in the house, would be fit to be tied.

Skeeter crouched low in the black shadows, grinning. Let Tom Dwyer come charging out of the house now. The lighted doorway would make him a target. Skeeter would yell at him to fill his hand. Then he'd

start shooting. He'd empty his gun into Tom Dwyer's paunch!

THREE men on horseback rode into sight, coming from the direction of the Mexican line. They passed within fifty feet of where Skeeter crouched, and he got a fairly good look at them. They rode straight toward the house.

"Grub ready?" one of them called. "Fetch out a jug, Tom!"

The kitchen door swung open. Tom Dwyer, hatless, his sleeves rolled to his elbows, his thick black hair sweat-matted above his face that was covered by a ten days' growth of dust-grimed black beard, showed in the lighted doorway.

Three six-shooters roared at the same second, belching streaks of flame. Tom Dwyer, jaw sagging, a bewildered look on his face, his two hairy hands free of weapons, swayed drunkenly for a moment. Then his long legs in their saddle-warped overalls buckled at the knees and he crumpled in the doorway and lay there in a lifeless heap.

"That does the job, boys," said one of the three men. They reined their horses and rode off at a long lope. The night hid them completely. When the last sounds of their going faded in the distance Skeeter, his face drained of blood, quit the shelter of the mesquite brush and, still gripping his six-shooter, walked slowly, warily toward the motionless heap that blocked the lighted doorway.

Tom Dwyer lay so that his face was twisted upward in the lamplight. A trickle of blood oozed from his open mouth, staining his black beard. His steel-gray, bloodshot eyes were wide open, glazed by death. The notched cedar butt of his gun showed, the weapon undrawn in its worn, shabby holster.

Tom Dwyer had been murdered, shot down by men who had killed him without giving him any part of a fighting chance!

Skeeter's hatred for Tom Dwyer was gone. He looked at the face of the dead man. Then he stared into the night in the direction the three killers had taken. The stunned feeling that had numbed him, paralyzing him, gradually left the boy.

"You damned, low-down, bushwhackin', murderin' snakes!" the boy's voice croaked. "You was his pardners. He wouldn't have opened the door, otherwise. Damn your black hearts! I'll know yuh when I cut your sign!"

Even Tom Dwyer, ornery as he was, had deserved a better break than cold-blooded murder. Tom had fought in the open. The notches on his gun tallied men he had killed in fair fight. Three against one, Skeeter told himself over and over, as he stood there, his gun gripped in his hand, staring out into the star-filled night, and still they didn't have the guts to give Tom a break for his gun.

"I'll cut their sign," he kept muttering. "I'll know 'em. They ain't winnin' this."

It didn't occur to Skeeter that there was anything inconsistent about the fact that he wanted to avenge the death of a man who had given him nothing but abuse. Skeeter Roberts was, after all, only fourteen years old. Part kid, part man, with the blood of Harry Roberts, the old ramrod of the Turkey Track in his veins—Harry Roberts who had been called Square Harry.

Skeeter got the Zebra dun and rode him back to the cabin. He took the saddle scabbard from Tom's saddle, tied it on his own saddle and shoved Tom's carbine into it. He took Tom's gun belt and the cedar-

handled six-shooter with its three notches, hanging the gun and belt on his saddlehorn.

He emptied the dead man's pockets of their contents. There was twenty-five dollars in paper money and some Mexican silver pesos, a jackknife and a little leather-covered brand and tally book filled with Tom's tallies of cattle and horses, with notes he had jotted down from time to time. That tally book was Tom Dwyer's record of his dealings along the border. Skeeter reckoned it would make interesting reading, even if it never came in handy for anything else. It was no pleasant task, going through Tom's pockets, and he was glad when the job was done.

He got a pick and shovel and dug a grave. He brought a blanket and canvas tarpaulin from Tom's bunk and wrapped the dead man in it. Confronted by the problem of moving the two-hundred-pound body to the grave a hundred yards away, Skeeter got the big stiff bullhide that had a single-tree fastened to it. It was used at the barn to drag the manure and old used bedding from the stalls. He rolled the tarpaulin-wrapped corpse on the bullhide, fastened his saddle rope to it, and dragged it by his saddlehorn to the open grave.

He felt a little sick at his stomach when the heavy body hit the bottom of the grave with a dull thud. Sweat bathed his wiry little body as he filled the grave and tamped the mound of fresh earth with the blade of the shovel.

Skeeter knew that Tom Dwyer had some money cached in a coffee can that was buried down in the cellar. Now that Tom was dead, he reckoned that he had a right to take it. To his surprise, the coffee can was more than half filled with paper money. Without counting them, he shoved the bills into his pockets. It seemed like he was handling all the money he would ever need. This was Tom's South America stake that he had stolen cattle and horses and risked his liberty and life to get.

Skeeter wondered why the three killers had not hunted for the cache. They had ridden off like they were in a rush to get away from the place. Probably they figured that he was in the house and they wanted to drag it before they were sighted. Either that or they had a notion that Tom had squandered the money he had made.

Anyhow, the boy told himself, it didn't matter much. He had Tom's South America stake. And he had better be hitting the trail for Canada before those three killers took a notion to come back, or the law showed up. Skeeter had been taught by Tom Dwyer to hate and fear the law and the men who wore law badges. They were his natural enemies. Like a hound pack after a wolf, Tom had repeated many a time.

THERE was one last chore that Skeeter had in mind. His horse was saddled. There was a sack full of jerky for grub tied to his saddle. He had two six-shooters and a carbine, just like Billy the Kid. His pockets were stuffed with money. He aimed to travel light. A packed bed-horse would slow him down. But there was this last chore. It was something he had planned to do if ever he cut loose and took to the outlaw trail.

In his cabin were two unopened bottles of black ink he had bought in Nogales. He lit a candle and set the cracked mirror where the candlelight would hit it. Then he opened

the ink bottles. With a small rag that he dipped in the ink, he dabbed at his straw-colored hair. His hand shook with an eager anxiety. That yellow hair would be black. Skeeter grinned. He went to work now with feverish haste, humming under his breath the tune of Billy the Kid. He got ink on his hands and big spots of it on his shirt. But his grin was wide when he took stock of his changed appearance in the dim, flickering candlelight.

His hair was certainly black. Black as the hair of the world's champion cowboy, Lon Lonigan. It was a cinch nobody could call him tow-headed now.

"Black as a raven's wing," he told himself, quoting from Deadwood Dick.

There was still the matter of his hawk nose and his height and the mustache. But they couldn't he helped. And he was too elated, too excited to take note of the fact that his eyebrows were still the color of corn silk. He blew out the candle and went outside.

By some hasty work with the big blade of Tom's knife, Skeeter managed to whittle down the cartridge belt so that, by pulling it up to the new holes he cut for the buckle, and by tying it to his suspenders where they buttoned to his overalls, he got it to stay around his slim flanks. He had some difficulty walking with the holstered six-shooter tied on his leg, but he'd have time to practice till he got used to it. Then as the gray of dawn began to lighten the night sky he mounted the Zebra dun and headed north.

Sunrise found him fifteen miles or more from the ranch. He knew the country for fifty miles. But beyond that he would be crossing strange skylines, watching new range spread out before him. What lay beyond those far horizons would be what life and fate and luck had in store for young Skeeter Roberts, range orphan.

Adventure beckoned. Skeeter's blood pulsed swiftly. When the sun rose in a cloudless sky he watched the moving shadow made by him and his horse. He sang Billy the Kid from the first verse to the last wailing note of the chorus, sang with his heart beating time. Nor did he know that his boyish voice had the sweet clarity of some songbird. He would have quit singing if he realized that his voice was something that music masters would have praised—because a sweet voice would have been as sissified as straw-colored hair or a nickname like Skeeter.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW NIGHTHAWK

IT had rained most of the night. The dawn was a gray, foggy drizzle that chilled a man's bones to the marrow. Little old Chisholm McNabb, better known as Ornery Chiz, was ramrodding a brush-popper roundup spread in the roughest part of Bloody Basin. Squatted on his spurred boot heels near the campfire that was partly sheltered by a canvas wagon sheet tied to the branches of a couple of piñon trees, he shivered as the drizzle, slowly soaking through his faded, brush-scarred denim jumper, chilled his back. Water dripped from the shapeless crown of his battered hat, splashing the black coffee in the big tin cup that warmed his two hands.

The cook sloshed around in the mud, cussing aimlessly as he lifted the lids of his dutch ovens with a long pothook. The half dozen Muleshoe cowpunchers reluctantly quit the warmth of their tarp-covered blan-

kets and joined old Chiz at the fire. The cook told them irascibly to get the hell back so that he could get the grub rassled and that they were tromping around till they had the ground as boggy as a Florida swamp, but they paid him little attention as they filled cups with the black coffee and rolled soggy cigarettes. The odor of cooking meat and bread and beans hung in the windless, foggy, dripping air.

Chiz McNabb cussed the weather, cussed the country, cussed his job and this business of punching cows in a country that was stood on end. His bones were getting too brittle to stand the falls a man had to take catching wild cattle in the roughs.

The nighthawk showed up with about a fifth of the remuda. He growled that it would take a crew of men and a tight-wire pasture to hold a horse cavvy on a night like last night had been. A man had to be owl-eyed and quadruplets not to spill horse on such a fog-filled black night.

Old Chiz was more than a little relieved. He had dreaded uncocking a horse that would be cold-backed and have some buck in him. He dreaded the wild, neck-breaking chase after the wild cattle that ranged in the rough, broken Bloody Basin range. Twenty-five years ago he would have been rearing to go. But this weather put rheumatic aches in his old bones. He and his men would put in the morning hunting the scattered remuda. By ten-eleven o'clock when they got back to camp the fog and drizzle would be lifted and the chill gone from the air. But, nevertheless, he cussed out the nighthawk, accusing him in no uncertain terms of bushing up in the shelter of some rimrock and letting his cavvy of horses and pack mules scatter from hell to breakfast.

"Then you better git a man that kin git the job done," snapped the nighthawk who was more or less guilty of the old ramrod's accusations. "To hell with it. I'm pullin' out for town."

"Then eat when you git there!" Old Chiz, cranky, chilled, got to his feet. "Drag it! Git outa my sight afore I double a rope an' whup you outa camp!"

The nighthawk, beefy, big-boned man, started to swing at Chiz. But before the blow landed, a long arm reached out, grabbed him by the neck of his brush-jumper, yanked him off his feet. The nighthawk went sprawling on his back in the mud.

"The next time you're spoilin' to take a poke at somebody," Lon Lonigan grinned down at him, "pick somebody your size and age. I thought I heard Chiz tell you to drag it. If I was you, mister, I'd lose no time rattlin' my hocks. Pick yourself up and drift. Yonder comes your remuda."

THE jingle of the bells, the sound of shod hoofs, splashing in the mud or clicking against the rocks, announced the coming of the horses hidden in the fog. Then, above those sounds, in clear, silvery tones, came the song of Billy the Kid.

The cowpunchers listened, forgetting to sip their steaming coffee. Old Chiz broke off in the middle of some profane, caustic remark about horses that knew more than thick-skulled nighthawks. Lon Lonigan forgot the nighthawk who got to his feet and slipped unnoticed to where he had left his saddled horse.

The remuda came into sight, appearing out of the fog like some trick of magic. Chiz McNabb and his brush-popper cowpunchers stared at

the small figure on the big line-backed dun. Chiz shook his head, rubbed the back of a brush-scabbed hand across his eyes and broke the silence.

"You see what I see, Lon? Green?"

"Green as new grass," nodded Lon Lonigan.

Skeeter, sighting the campfire and cowpunchers, had quit singing. He had been singing for hours, singing to keep his teeth from chattering during long, black hours when his body was stiff and numb from cold. Sight of the warm fire, the smell of hot grub and coffee, brought a grin to his face, a face that was streaked a livid green. Unaware of his weird coloring, the boy drove the horses into the rope corral, then rode toward the men at the campfire.

They stared at him. A small boy with a green-streaked face, a carbine in his saddle scabbard, a cartridge belt and two six-shooters strapped around his slim waist. His clothes and hat were sodden, his blue eyes rain-washed, a little sunken. Strands of greenish hair showed from under the rain-soaked, shapeless old hat.

Skeeter's heart jumped as he recognized Lon Lonigan. He grinned as his tall Texican hero broke the silence.

"Up till now I'd always believed that pine needles didn't run their color in the rain. If I was a hard-drinkin' man like Chiz McNabb, I'd think I had 'em and I'd take the pledge. Son, you just nacherally can't be plumb real. You show up here with a cavvy of horses that was spilled in a fog like pea soup. We hear a angel voice a-singin'. Then a button with a green hide and green hair— Whoa, son!"

Lon Lonigan could move with the speed of a lightweight. He grabbed Skeeter as the boy, trying to dismount, lost his balance. Skeeter's night ride had cramped his limbs. The cold had all but paralyzed him. Lon carried him to a big log near the fire. Skeeter tried to grin. He felt dizzy, like he was going to faint. And he was ashamed to show any weakness in front of Lon Lonigan.

Old Chiz held his cup of hot black coffee to the boy's stiff lips. A cowpuncher dragged a heavy wool blanket from his bed and put it around the boy's shivering shoulders, wrapping him up from head to foot. Skeeter had lost his hat, and his hair, hanging down across his forehead, looked more like over-colored seaweed than anything else.

"What," asked Lon Lonigan, trying to keep the laughter from his voice, "what in hell is that green stuff you got on your hair, button?"

Skeeter saw the green drops. He noticed his hand that clutched the blanket. It was stained green. That ink. That damn black ink. It had turned green, somehow. And it wasn't waterproof. He rubbed his cheek and the palm of his hand showed green, too.

For a moment or two Skeeter wanted to crawl off somewheres and die. Then he saw the grin on Lon Lonigan's face. The sparks of laughter in the big Texan's black eyes.

"It's ink," said Skeeter, making a clean breast of it. "It said black on the bottle. I wanted my hair black—like yourn. The damn stuff musta turned green on me."

When Lon Lonigan laughed, he laughed. His head tilted back. His big white teeth showed. The hills flung back the echoes of the laughter that came from the bottom of a pair of leathery lungs. The other Muleshoe cowpunchers laughed, too. Old Chiz McNabb's seamed, leathery face spread in a wide grin.

Even the grouchy cook joined in. The nighthawk, headed for town, was the only man in the outfit who was not getting his share of fun out of it.

WHEN the cook brought his shaving mirror and held it up in front of the boy, Skeeter laughed until tears came to his eyes. Until his throat ached. It had been a long, long time since young Skeeter had laughed. He had almost forgotten how.

One of the cowpunchers started to hooraw the boy about his two six-shooters. Lon Lonigan silenced him with a quick, hard look. Lon, studying the boy, had seen something behind that comical green skin and thatch of grass-colored hair. He must have seen a lot when he looked into the youngster's blue eyes. Perhaps it was because Lon himself had been left an orphan when he was about Skeeter's age. Anyhow he piled a plate with grub and filled a cup with coffee and told the boy to eat slowly.

"When did you git outside of your last square meal, button?" he asked casually.

"About a week," Skeeter admitted. "I had a sack of jerky. It held out till yesterday. I was headed for the Canadian line. Got sorta lost in the dark last night and give Zebra his head. Heard horse bells an' found Zebra had taken me to where horses was grazin' in a pocket. I rounded 'em up and let 'em head for camp. I just follered along till we got here. I knowed it was the remuda of some spread that was workin' in here and that mebbyso the cavvy had got spilled in the night."

"That's long-headed," said Chiz approvingly. "Shore long-headed. Many's a growed man that ain't got that much savvy. Damn nigh froze, in the bargain. I'm short-handed. How'd you like to tackle the night-hawkin' job?"

Lon Lonigan, Skeeter figured, was working for this outfit. That cinched it. He'd work for his beans to be near Lon Lonigan and watch him rope.

"I'd shore be proud to give 'er a try," he said.

That was how Skeeter Roberts hired out to the Muleshoe. Chiz asked the boy his name.

For a second or two Skeeter was stumped. He had aimed to change his name. Call himself Lon or Kid Lonigan. But he couldn't do it—not with Lon right here.

"It's Skeeter," he said, his voice dull. "Hell of a name, ain't it?"

"I wouldn't say that," argued Lon. "Only feller that ever beat me tyin' five steers was called Skeeter. You mind that matched ropin', Chiz? He shore took my money. They didn't come any faster than Skeeter. You live up to that nickname, son, and you'll be bustin' world's records with a rope an' hog-gin' string."

That warmed Skeeter more than the steaming coffee. He wanted to ask what color hair that Skeeter had. Then he remembered that his own hair was the color of pine needles and he kept still.

"You kin stay on here," Lon said, "till your hair and hide git faded out some. I wouldn't walk bareheaded around them pack mules, either. They'll start a-grazin' on you, shore."

It wasn't every kid that got joshed by a world's champion cowboy. Skeeter grinned from ear to ear. The Muleshoe cowpunchers laughed and hoorawed him. Skeeter was cowhand enough to know what

that meant. They were accepting him as one of the outfit. Those hard-riding brush-poppers didn't bother to josh a man they didn't like.

OLD Chiz explained Skeeter's duties. "It ain't like night-hawkin' with a regular roundup outfit. This is just a pack spread gatherin' wild cattle and brandin' mavericks, gatherin' what the roundup missed when he worked in there. There's only a small cavvy of horses and of a clear night you kin throw 'em into a canyon and ketch some sleep. It's only of a rainy night that you got to actually nighthawk 'em. All the drifters in the cavvy has bells on 'em. Last night was dark and damp, but a good nighthawk would have fetched in more than that no-account wrangler showed up with. He was bushed-up somewheres all night with his head under him.

"Clear nights, son, you kin sleep the middle part. Just as long as you have the horses in the corral by breakfast, that's all I'm askin'. Daytimes you kinda help the cook. See that he has wood cut and the water buckets is filled. And keep an eye on the remuda. Kinda horse jingler and nighthawk both, savvy?"

"And the rest of the time you kin call your own," Lon Lonigan put in. "Unless you got a horse or mule to shoe or corral ropes to mend or kiack boxes and pack saddles to fix. I notice you didn't fetch along no bed, Skeeter. You don't need one, nohow. The Muleshoe will furnish you a lantern."

"I raised that big ox," growled the little old Muleshoe ramrod, "from a wind-bellied dogie. When he was young, he squalled. After his voice changed, he roared. He was always cripplin' cattle, practicin' ropin' before he was big enough to fork a pony without standin' on a rock. Pay that long-geared Texican no never-minds, son. A Mexican mule's got him cheated for brains." But there was a twinkle in old Chiz McNabb's puckered sky-blue eyes.

Chiz and his men started to catch their circle horses. It was still drizzling and the air was raw. In this brushy country a cowpuncher couldn't wear a slicker. Catclaw and mesquite would tear it to ribbons in no time. They kept their short denim brush-jumpers buttoned, but the rain soaked through. Their chaps kept their legs partially dry, but little trickles of water would come down the backs of their legs from their saddles.

Chiz rode a string of top horses. Steel-dust breed. There was a camel's hump in the back of Chiz's big chestnut sorrel. Skeeter saw Lon and a couple of cowpunchers pull a trick on the little old ramrod that gave him an insight into the soft spot inside their hearts.

A couple of them called Chiz back to the fire on some pretext. Lon stepped up in the middle of the big chestnut, gigged the horse with his spurs. Pitched him down the wash a way and rode him back, swinging his loop and roping at little patches of brush, whirling and reining the cow horse until the animal was warmed up, with no more buck left in him.

"Had my eye on this pony, Chiz," Lon grinned. "I need a fast rope horse for the Prescott contest. He shore handles sweet. Mebbyso if I kin ketch you when you ain't got a horn drooped, I kin swap you outa this geldin'." He swung from the saddle.

"He's a good un, ain't he?" Chiz said. "Faster'n greased lightnin' and you kin rope the biggest ox in Bloody

Basin on him and he'll git the job done for yuh."

Lon had let the hammer down on the big steeldust chestnut, taken the buck out of the horse, and done it in such a way that the little old cowpuncher never suspected. Chiz was prideful as hell. Not for all the cattle in Bloody Basin would he have asked any man in the outfit to uncock his horse on a bad morning.

Skeeter savvied and his admiration for Lon swelled his heart. Lon, for all the contests he'd won, wasn't swell-headed. Nobody could accuse Lon Lonigan of having Stetson fever.

Chiz pointed out a chunky brown horse. "Dab your line on Little Brown Jug, Skeeter. He's one of your string. And don't think that just because he's in the horse-wrangler's string that he can't ketch a calf right now. You ain't got a sorry mount in your string, son. There ain't a horse in the Muleshoe iron that ain't as good as the tops in any other remuda in Arizona."

Lon rode up as Skeeter was saddling. He had watched the boy rope his horse. Skeeter handled a ketch-rope like an old hand.

"We'll be holdin' up at the mouth of the wash," he told Skeeter, "in case you git your camp chores done and want to watch the brandin'. We're ridin' a short circle this mornin' account of the bad weather. So we won't come in to change horses. I'll tell Chiz you're fetchin' the brandin' irons. Four will do. And I don't reckon you'll need your guns. Put 'em in my bed. I'm splittin' my blankets with you, button."

That last remark took the sting out of his hint about the guns. None of the Muleshoe cowhands were packing six-shooters. Though every man owned one, they left them in their bedrolls.

CHAPTER IV

OLD CHIZ GOES DOWN

CHIZ rode off, Lon and the others following him. Skeeter let the horses out of the corral and drifted them up the wash where the feed was plentiful. When he came back he was dragging a good pitch log he had found high up on the slope. He got the ax and split the log into small chunks. The cook, a grizzled ex-cowpuncher with a twisted leg that he had gotten from a bad fall that had ended his career as a brush-popper, rewarded the boy with half a pie he had cached out. By the time the pie was eaten, Skeeter and the crotchety old cook, who was called Gimpy, were fast friends.

Gimpy put some vinegar and warm water in the battered tin wash basin and told the boy to try it on his hair. Skeeter tried, but the experiment was a failure. His hair was still green. Soap, lard, some vile-smelling medicine used for doctoring screw worms, all failed in turn to get the green stain out of his hair. They tried turpentine that blistered Skeeter's scalp, and Gimpy rubbed on some gall cure salve to take away the burning pain. It left Skeeter's hair a sticky green thatch that added to his somewhat appalling appearance.

"She's no dice, Skeeter. Looks like we'll have to use the horse clippers or you go bareheaded and let the sun bleach 'er. That dome of yourn still looks like a alfalfa patch. You're a shore-enough green hand." Gimpy chuckled at his own witticisms, and Skeeter, his scalp burning and itching, did his best to grin. Gimpy fed him more pie.

"I ain't the man to git personal,

Skeeter," he said as the boy ate the dried-prune pie, "but that dun horse of yourn shore is a good un. An almighty good horse for a range poddie to be forkin'. I seen that damn nighthawk Ray Shaw a-lookin' over the T D brand on his shoulder and that blotched brand on his left thigh. Ray Shaw ain't the man to forgit that you shore showed him up for a sheepherder when you fetched in his remuda. If there's anything wrong about that big dun of—"

"You say his name's Ray Shaw?" Skeeter cut in. "Is he kinda heavy-set and got a knife scar on one side of his face? I never noticed him. I wasn't in shape to pay much attention to nobody when I hit camp."

Skeeter desperately threw his loop, but already the wild steer was lunging for old Chiz.

"That's the gent. Know him?"

"I—I've seen him down along the border."

SKEETER'S grin was gone. His spirits were suddenly as soggy as the mud around the campfire. Ray Shaw was one of the tough hands that Tom Dwyer had trailed with. He had drifted away from the border about a year ago after getting into some sort of scrape on the Mexican side. The green ink might have disguised Skeeter's identity but Ray Shaw would know that big Zebra horse.

Skeeter didn't know where or how Tom Dwyer had gotten the line-backed dun. The brand on the horse's left thigh had been blotched when Tom rode him home one dark night after a two weeks' absence from the ranch. Ray Shaw had been with the bunch that Tom had fetched home that night.

There was little doubt in the boy's mind about the dun. Mighty few of Tom Dwyer's horses had been honestly bought or traded for. But Skeeter's training under his cattle-rustling, horse-thieving stepfather had taught him to be close-mouthed. He wasn't confiding in Gimpy. Not yet, anyhow. But he did aim to tell Lon Lonigan when he got the chance. He reckoned that Lon was a man he could tie to.

"Ray Shaw shore looked that dun horse over before he snuk off for town like a whupped yaller dawg," said Gimpy. "If there's anything not just right about that big geldin', son, git shut of him pronto. I ain't askin' no questions, mind. But you're too good a kid to git tripped up by the law. I'm passin' along the advice of an old hand for what it's worth. Now go into my li'le ol' tepee and grab forty-fifty winks. That cavvy ain't a-goin' to scatter. I'll borrow your horse and ride up the wash to have a look at 'em directly I git this batch of sour dough started. You look tuckered out. A growin' kid needs plenty sleep and grub.

"And, son, whoever told you that you had to smoke cigarettes to be a cowboy was a damn liar. I'd throw them papers and terbaccer in the fire. I shore wouldn't let Lon ketch me rollin' cigarettes if I was you. For all his toughness, Lon Lonigan is as hidebound as a camp meetin' preacher about some things. And Chiz claims he was the toughest, orneriest li'le ol' button he ever seen when he hit the Turkey Track Ranch years ago.

"Chiz broke him of smokin' and chawin' and drinkin' and cussin' and what other ornery habits he'd picked up when he was a driftin' li'le poddie. I've heard it said that Lon killed a man when he was about your age. He was settin' out to build hisself a tough rep. Just like all us kids did that was raised around cow camps and tough towns along the cattle trails. Now a man has to crowd Lon Lonigan almighty hard to git a quarrel of any kind outa him. But when he starts, son, he's hell on wheels.

"He handled Ray Shaw this mornin' like he'd handle some harmless drunk sheepherder. But if Shaw had connected with ol' Chiz McNabb's jaw when he swung, that tough-hand nighthawk would still be sleepin' in the mud.

"Chiz is the only daddy Lon ever had. That's why Lon's workin' right now with the Muleshoes helpin' Chiz get a clean work on Bloody Basin. Lon could be makin' big money follerin' the rodeos instead of wastin' time with this pack spread. But Lon knows that Chiz is gittin' too old to run a outfit any more. And if he don't git this Bloody Basin

worked clean the owners will git a younger man to rod the layout.

"Ol' Chiz is holdin' down his last job punchin' cows. He's too old and stove-up to stand the hard knocks. But he's spent his money for whiskey or give it out to men that has takin' ways and bad memories. He's too damn prideful to lay 'em down. He rides a string of fast cow horses that would bother most younger cowhands to set. He won't take a dollar from Lon ner no other man. He won't quit punchin' cows till he matches a race with a wild steer on a steep slant and gits his skinny neck broke. Ol' Chiz McNabb will never sell his saddle."

THERE was a huskiness in old Gimpy's voice that put a lump in Skeeter's throat. Not many years ago this old roundup cook had been as wild a cowboy as ever tied down an ornery longhorned steer. Now he was limping around on a twisted leg that was six inches shorter than the other, lifting dutch-oven lids with a pothook. He, too, had spent his hard-earned forty a month with a reckless, to-hell-with-tomorrow hand.

That was how many a top-hand cowpuncher finished. Crippled, broke, living in his memories. Cowpunchers who saved their money and got to own their own outfits were few and far between. Every big old-time outfit had their pensioned-off cowhands that puttered around the home ranch and told the younger hands how it used to be done.

But times were changing. Barb wire was being stretched across old roundup trails. Civilization was pushing back the frontier of the cow country. Big outfits were changing hands. Eastern money was buying up the old outfits, putting in a new breed of ranch boss who ran the outfit as cheaply and efficiently as he knew how. Some of these new ranch foremen had even been to college to study the breeding of white-faced cattle, and they were putting in feeding plants.

Those new straw bosses had no time for sentiment. No cow country traditions and loyalties hampered their progress. Old cowhands like Chiz McNabb were counted as dead wood and treated as such. These Eastern cattle syndicate owners were cold-blooded. The gray-haired old cowhand would, before many years, be as hard to find on the range as a buffalo.

Skeeter knew that. He had heard Tom Dwyer and other cowpunchers talk about it countless times. Mexico, South America, countries like that were the only places where there was still free range and a man could swing his loop without hanging it on a fence post. The Muleshoe was one of the few big outfits left that was still owned by real cowmen. But if times got tough, if the drought hit a few years in succession, if cattle prices dropped, it was only natural that they would sell out to Eastern capital. Chiz and old-timers like him would have to saddle their private horses and drift on. And they knew no other kind of work than this cowpunching they had been born and raised in. It was in their blood, in their hearts.

They would ride away from the cow country they had pioneered. They would top the far skyline and stop for one last backward look at their home range. Then they would ride on, to vanish as the buffalo had vanished. Younger men would take their place here. Men like Lon Lonigan who could make more in one day at some big rodeo, if he was a top-hand contestant, than old hands like Chiz, ramrodding an outfit like

the Muleshoes, could make in a month, two months. More than a few times Lon had left some big rodeo after a four-day contest with more money than Chiz had ever made in a year's hard work.

"Chiz and me and many another old-time cowhand who has invested his money in houses and lots—gamblin' *houses* and *lots* of likker—will be plumb ex-tinct, son. We're leavin' what's left of the cow country to young fellers like you. Now bed down in my tepee and don't come alive till I call yuh."

But, in spite of his last night's ride, Skeeter had no intention of sleeping. They would he bringing in their drives of cattle from the short circle. Holding the herd at the mouth of the wash. Lon Lonigan would be doing the roping. And Skeeter had never seen the world's champion cowboy rope.

"I'm takin' the irons down the wash," he told Gimpy. "Lon told me I could. A man kin sleep any time."

Old Gimpy chuckled as Skeeter picked out four Muleshoe branding irons and rode off, the irons across the front of his saddle.

The boy's song drifted back out of the thinning fog and drizzle. Clear as the song of a meadowlark. Something he had gleaned from old Gimpy's talk had turned Skeeter's thoughts from Billy the Kid. It was the "Cowboy's Lament" that he sang as his brown pony threaded its way down the wash, following the twisting, muddy trail.

"Oh, beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly,
Play the Dead March as you bear me along;
Take me to the boothill and lay the sod o'er me,
For I'm a wild cowboy, and I know I've done wrong."

The smoke seemed to have gotten in old Gimpy's eyes. He brushed at them roughly with the back of his hand, limping on his twisted leg around his dutch ovens, his face looking seamed and old and gray in the thin, dismal drizzle.

Skeeter rode on, the branding irons clinking, sitting his saddle with the easy grace of a born horseman. His blue eyes were misty with dreams, his young heart throbbing in his song. His yesterdays were few. His tomorrows were ahead of him, painted the bright colors that belong to youth.

THE sudden crash of brush and tumbling rocks from the steep slope caused Skeeter to pull up sharply. He saw a big long-horned spotted steer come off the ridge on a run. Jumping boulders, crashing through brush thickets, headed down the steep side of the wash. Not more than fifty feet behind the big outlaw steer came old Chiz on his fast chestnut sorrel.

Chiz's battered hat was jammed down on his head. He was holding his bridle reins just tight enough to keep his horse on balance. His right arm was raised, his loop cocked back over his shoulder to keep it from being snagged by a tree limb or brush, ready to throw. Chiz rode with the break-neck, reckless daring of the wild brush-popping cowboy. The big steel-dust cow horse came down the slippery, treacherous slant with goatlike leaps. Mud and gravel flew as the shod hoofs hit the ground, challenging death, spitting in the devil's eye. Every thought of danger was flung aside in that wild race.

There was nothing old or stove-up or slow about old Chiz McNabb when he matched a race with an outlaw steer in the roughs. Skeeter caught a brief glimpse of the old

cowhand's leathery face, his teeth showing in a mirthless grin. A tree limb had raked his cheek, tearing the leathery skin, marking it with a line of blood.

The steer and cowboy and horse flashed past Skeeter, oblivious of his presence. As they neared the foot of the slope, Skeeter saw Chiz swing his loop. He was close behind the steer, in a little clearing. It was a case of roping now or losing the steer in the heavy brush beyond.

Chiz was making one of those split-second decisions that a brush-popper sometimes has to make. The ground was steep-slanting, slippery as wet soap. Chiz's loop sped out, caught the steer's head. It had to be a big loop to drop over that wide spread of horns. The loop dropped back on the steer's neck, settled, jerked taut at the base of the neck where it met the shoulders.

A smaller loop jerked tight behind the steer's jaws and ears and horns would have jerked the animal's head back, thrown the steer in a swift somersault. But with the loop down deep on the steer's neck, the animal had the advantage. Chiz knew it. Skeeter knew it. The horse knew it. The rope was tied to the saddle-horn. There was no turning loose.

The steer lunged, headed down the slope on a run. The game-hearted horse slid, hind feet slipping, sliding. Its rump hit the muddy slope, and horse and rider went down! The big steer, bawling, was jerked around. Nostrils wide, eyes red, the big outlaw charged the fallen horse and old Chiz, whose right leg was caught and held between the horse and the ground. That steer was on the prod. The five-foot spread of horns were black-tipped, sharp and deadly as Spanish dagger cactus.

The branding irons made a metallic, clanging clatter as Skeeter dumped them off the saddle and jerked at the loop of his rope strap. He had a loop swinging before the Little Brown Jug pony had taken its third jump. The pony needed no spurring. He was as wise as his young rider.

Skeeter saw the big steer charge Chiz and the fallen horse, saw the long, black-tipped horns swing wickedly. He heard old Chiz give a sharp cry of pain, arms flung across his face. Then the steer hit the end of the rope and was jerked around. Its red eyes saw Skeeter and the little brown horse flash past its hind quarters. Skeeter's loop swung down in a swift dip and caught the steer's two hind legs. The rope jerked taut. The outlaw steer was thrown off its feet, stretched out on its side.

Skeeter quit his saddle with a swift, catlike leap, his hogging string in his hand. His arms and hands worked with sure speed till the hogging strings held the steer's two hind legs and one foreleg in a hard and fast tie. Skeeter jerked his jack-knife and cut Chiz's saddle rope free.

"That's wrappin' up your meat, you green-headed li'le ol' brush-hand," croaked Chiz. There was a spreading red stain on his mud-smeared flannel shirt. His face was as gray as an old dishrag.

Chiz's head sagged. One of the steer's horns had ripped his ribs badly. He was unconscious when Skeeter got him free of the big chestnut sorrel that scrambled to its feet and limped off a few steps, crippled in one foreleg.

Two Muleshoe cowpunchers had seen the whole thing from the ridge. They turned loose their little drive of cattle and came riding down the slope. One of them, a big, powerful man, picked up the broken, blood-smeared little ramrod and carried him as a man might carry a

child. He got on his horse and rode back up the wash to camp, the unconscious, badly injured old cowhand in his arms.

The other cowpuncher took the saddle and bridle off the crippled horse, examined the animal's leg and shoulder.

"Pulled a tendon or sprung his shoulder. No bones busted. Won't have to shoot 'im. Damn lucky for the horse and for Chiz that you showed up, button. Old Chiz shore got 'er. Better ride down the wash and tell Lon that the ol' feller's bad hurt, mebby dyin'. Lon'd want to be there if Chiz dies."

Skeeter nodded. The tied-down steer was struggling, swinging its head. There was blood on one of its horns. The boy's throat was tight and he wished he had a gun so that he could kill that outlaw steer. He got on his horse and rode down the wash, slowly coiling his wet, muddy rope. He was thinking about what old Gimpy had said. Maybe Chiz had roped his last wild steer in the roughs. Skeeter kept swallowing the aching lump in his throat. Unshed tears stung his eyes like hot sand.

CHAPTER V

A HORSE THIEF'S PROPOSITION

THEY rigged a stretcher out of a tarp and blankets and packed old Chiz out of Bloody Basin. Gimpy dug up an unopened quart of whiskey out of his warsack, and told Chiz, who was conscious and trying to tough it out, to work on the bottle like he owned it. Lon went in to town with the injured old ramrod who had turned the outfit over to a cowboy called Baldy.

The talk around the campfire that evening was about wild chases after outlaw steers, men that had been crippled up or killed, notorious outlaw steers like Rough Canyon Red, the Verde Dun, Big Whitey, and the big spotted steer Calico that had gored Chiz that morning.

Old Chiz, who was noted for his cranky, ornery, cussing ways, was not a man who praised any man's work. But in front of them all he had paid Skeeter tribute that had warmed the boy's heart.

"A sight fer sore eyes, brush-poppers and gentle Annies," Chiz had said, gripping the neck of the whiskey bottle. "That Calico ox a-slobberin' and fixin' to charge me an' my pony. Then come this green-headed button, face streaked like somethin' born in a alfalfa patch, his Brown Jug pony let out to the last notch and his loop a-swingin' like an old hand.

"Just as the Calico steer fixes to charge me, the button picks up them hind laigs and the next thing I see is that steer stretched out and that li'le ol' green-topped thing is a-wrappin' up that ox's laigs in fast contest time. The damnedest sight I ever did see, drunk or sober. He shore saved me and my pony. Lon, that Skeeter boy will shore do to take along!"

Old Chiz had paid Skeeter the highest compliment in his book. The boy's heart was singing like a top when he drifted his horse cavvy off at dusk. Lon had told him that he was fetching a horse-jigger from town. Skeeter was too good a hand to be wasting his time wrangling horses. Skeeter was to be hired as a brush-popper as soon as Lon got back to the outfit with a man to take his place nighthawking.

Skeeter had drifted his remuda up into a canyon where the feed was

good. He was singing as he listened to the horse bells.

"My foot is in the stirrup, my pony won't stand.
Good-by, Old Paint, I'm a-leavin'—"

Skeeter's song broke like a snapped twig as a man rode out of the brush. It was Ray Shaw. There was a twisted, leering grin on the man's beefy face.

"Don't rabbit on me, button. I ain't a-goin' to hurt yuh."

"I didn't aim to rabbit, mister. But if Lon or Chiz ketches you coyotin' around, they'll make a bunch-quitter outa you."

"Don't try to bluff me, button. I seen Lon Lonigan takin' Chiz to town. I hope the ornery ol' cuss croaks on the way. Now don't git yourself in an uproar, yearlin'. I just rode over to fetch you the news, friendlylike. You string your bets with Ray Shaw and you might fool the law. Mebbyso you're too young to hang for murder, but you'd not be too young to do a stretch in reform school and finish 'er out in the pen."

"What you drivin' at, Shaw?" Skeeter's throat felt dry.

Ray Shaw handed him a Nogales newspaper. There was still light enough to read the print. Black headlines on the front page stunned the boy.

"NOTORIOUS BORDER COWMAN MURDERED! STEPSON HUNTED!" he read. "Tom Dwyer, colorful border character, is dead. His bullet-riddled body was found in a fresh grave at his ranch. Bloodstains in the doorway of the cabin and footprints and other sign found by border law officers told the story as plainly as if there had been an eye-witness to describe the cold-blooded killing.

"Dwyer was shot as he stood in the doorway of his cabin. Footprints that fitted a pair of discarded old boots left behind by Harry (Skeeter) Roberts, cigarette butts found behind a brush patch, showed plainly that the boy had crouched there for some time, waiting for his stepfather to show himself in the lighted doorway. Witnesses questioned told of the bitter hatred nursed by the fourteen-year-old boy who had resented the marriage of his widowed mother to Tom Dwyer.

"Young Skeeter Roberts attended school here at Nogales several winters. School companions testified that the boy was a tough youngster who had picked up vicious habits and wanted to be a second Billy the Kid. Young Roberts was twice arrested with his stepfather for butchering beef that belonged to someone else. They were freed both times for lack of sufficient evidence to convict them.

"While we hold no brief for Tom Dwyer whose reputation was none too savory, this newspaper and the public it represents feels that the law should punish this young killer. 'As the twig is bent, so grows the tree' is a trite but apt adage in this case. Young Skeeter Roberts must be apprehended and punished."

THERE was more. Pithy, caustic words that bluntly damned him as a desperate, vicious criminal. Skeeter felt sick inside. A week ago he might have gotten a lot of vain pleasure to find that he had become a notorious outlaw, branded as a killer, compared to Billy the Kid. But Lon and Chiz and Gimpy had somehow changed his whole outlook on life. He had put his guns in Lon's bedroll. He had thrown away his tobacco and cigarette papers. He was trying to

break himself of the habit of cussing.

"Paintin' your hair and face green was a hell of a way to try disguisin' yourself," Ray Shaw snickered. "And ridin' that T D dun that Tom stole from the feed barn at Nogales was a fool trick. The newspapers at Prescott will copy what's in the Nogales paper. And if you figger that the Muleshoe outfit is hidin' out you or anybody else, you got another guess a-comin'. You better drag it before Lonigan gits back to camp. And you can't start no sooner than right now. Looky here, Skeeter, you an' me kin take the bells off the horses and haze this remuda to hell an' gone before daybreak. I know where to peddle 'em and make a good piece of change. It's easier than shootin' fish and not half as dangerous. I got friends that'll hide you out because they hated Tom Dwyer. You'll be as safe as if you was in church."

"You go to hell, Shaw!" Skeeter's voice was rasping like sand burrs were stuck in his dry throat. "Drag it! Lemme alone! I never killed Tom! But I know who did and I'll see—"

"You'll what, you damned little coyote? You'll help me drift this Muleshoe cavvy or I'll have the law grab you. Understand, you young whelp?"

"Let 'em grab me," choked Skeeter. "I ain't a-playin' your game, mister. You ain't a-scarin' me none." He had slid his right hand in under his jumper as if he had a gun hidden there.

"If Baldy and the boys hear shootin', they'll come a-foggin'. They all got night horses staked out handy. You might kill me but the shootin' will fetch 'em on the run. They'll cut you down, mister, before you git far." Skeeter had purposely raised his voice until he was almost shouting.

"Shut up, you yappin' young coyote whelp!" Shaw tried to crowd his horse near Skeeter's, but the boy dodged his pony out of reach of the man's swinging fist.

"You git, mister, or I'll holler plenty!"

"Shut up! Quit yappin'! I'm a-goin'. But I'm comin' back tomorrow night. Read that paper good. Tomorrow night you drift them horses up the big wash. I'll meet you. If you double-cross me any way, I'll have the law down on you. That Nogales judge will throw the book at you, you young whelp. They'll lock you in jail and throw the key away. Chiz McNabb or Lon Lonigan can't spring the trap and git you out, neither. Think 'er over. Keep that trap of yourn shut and have that remuda where I told you, come dark tomorrow night!"

Ray Shaw rode off into the gathering dusk. Skeeter was shaking as if he had been taken by a sudden chill.

He had heard Tom Dwyer and his renegade pardners talk plenty times about how the law could railroad a man on circumstantial evidence. How, if you didn't have a smart lawyer, the law could jail you or hang you. That newspaper had already tried and convicted him. His goose was cooked to a crisp and no mistake. The law was going to bear down on tough young Skeeter Roberts who had bragged that he was going to be another Billy the Kid.

But that wasn't all the hell of it. Lon Lonigan would read about him in the paper. And Lon believed in the law. That was what made Skeeter's heart feel as heavy and cold as a hunk of ice-cold lead. The pit of his stomach felt like there was a big rock inside it.

SKEETER rode slowly back to camp. The fire had died down and the cowpunchers had gone to bed. Skeeter groped under Lon's tarp and soogans and blankets and he dragged out the cartridge belt and cedar-handled gun that had belonged to Tom Dwyer. He buckled on the belt with its notched gun and rode back to where his horse cavvy grazed. He aimed to kill Ray Shaw if that bulldozing horse thief showed up again tonight.

Tired as he was, Skeeter kept awake all night. His right hand never strayed far from the butt of his six-shooter. He spent the night trying to figure out what he would do.

He knew that Lon would side him if he got arrested. But even Lon Lonigan wasn't a big enough man to save him from going to the pen. He knew the three men who had murdered Tom Dwyer.

The feller they called Big Ears because of the way his ears stood out from his head like cabbage leaves; little dried-up, gimlet-eyed Weasel Smith; the flat-nosed, yellow-skinned, thick-necked man with pale gray eyes whom they called Nig. Tough hands, mean and ornery and cold-blooded as snakes. But they would have that smart lawyer Tom Dwyer had always hired to get him out of a tight.

Skeeter knew he didn't have a foot to stand on. He figured there was no use in getting Lon mixed up in it. The best thing for him to do was to saddle Zebra in the morning and pull out, head due north and keep riding till he crossed the Canadian line. He'd say nothing to anybody. Just drift. Leave that Nogales newspaper in Lon's bed for him to find when he got back from Prescott.

He corralled the horses at daybreak as the cowboys were coming out of the blankets. Gimpy called to him before he could hide the belt and gun. The cook was hanging a hind quarter of beef to a tree limb.

"Lend me a hand here a minute, Skeeter!" he called.

Skeeter helped hoist the beef. The folded newspaper dropped out of his chaps pocket. Gimpy started to pick it up but Skeeter grabbed it and shoved it back in the deep pocket. Before the old roundup cook could ask him any awkward questions the boy turned and walked away quickly. He could feel Gimpy's eyes following him. He unbuckled his gun belt and shoved it into Lon's bedroll, covertly watching the cook.

"Come and git 'er," bawled Gimpy, "or I'll throw 'er away!"

Skeeter thought that he detected a note of annoyance in the old fellow's voice. Gimpy was puzzled and hurt, he reckoned, and it made the boy feel guilty because it looked like he was mistrusting the old cook. But he couldn't tell Gimpy or anybody else about the tight he was in. They'd want to side him and he wasn't getting anybody mixed up in his affairs. He managed to slip the newspaper into Lon's warsack. He hid the cedar-handled gun in under his shirt and shoved a couple of handfuls of .45 cartridges into the pocket of his chaps.

Then he joined the men who were loading their plates with grub and filling their coffee cups. He avoided old Gimpy's eye and crammed food down his throat, washing it down with black coffee. When Baldy finished eating and dropped his empty plate and cup in the dishpan, Skeeter was right behind him. And when the last of the cowpunchers had caught his horse, Skeeter roped one of the horses in his string. He'd wait until they had gone and he

had shoved the remuda out of sight of camp before he roped Zebra and saddled him.

He drifted the remuda up the big wash and let them spread out to graze. The feed was good and there was water. The horses wouldn't scatter. Zebra had taken up with a little bunch of Muleshoe horses, making friends as a horse will do, and being accepted by the five or six head that were in the habit of following a big roan that wore a bell.

Skeeter, watching the Zebra dun make friends, grinned to himself. He savvied horses and never tired watching them, studying their habits. The big roan was Lon's private horse, the rope horse that had helped him with his championship. It tickled the boy to see how his horse took up with Lon's big roan. They acted like old pardners already.

SKEETER had lifted the loop of his rope strap from his saddlehorn and had shaken out a loop in his rope to snare Zebra. Now he coiled his rope and fastened it back on his saddle. He had come to a decision that changed his plans.

"I ain't coyotin'," he told himself. "I'm playin' Ray Shaw at his own game!"

Skeeter avoided camp. He got a few hours' sleep that morning and brought the remuda in when he sighted the cowboys riding to camp. Baldy asked him if he'd like to fetch the branding irons down to where they were going to brand out some calves and a few mavericks that they had gathered. The invitation brought a wide grin to the boy's green-streaked face.

"You bet!" was his quick reply.

He built the branding fire without being told and tended the irons until Baldy asked him if he'd like to stretch the kinks out of his rope. There were a couple of two-year-old mavericks to rope. Baldy head-roped the two critters and Skeeter heeled them with the ease and deft skill of an old hand. Baldy let him rope four calves and they all watched Skeeter heel them without a single wasted loop. That was heeling and no accident about the sure catches he made.

"Skeeter," Baldy told him, "you're a natural. Lon's eyes would booger out like a frawg's if he could 'a' seen you."

Praise like that was plain meat and drink to the boy. He almost forgot about the jackpot he was in until supper time. Several times during supper he caught old Gimpy studying him covertly. But the old roundup cook made no maneuver to get him off alone. When it was time to take the remuda out, Gimpy gave him a muslin sack filled with steak sandwiches and a whiskey bottle full of coffee, the nighthawk's midnight supper.

The Muleshoe had no beef herd to hold, but Baldy and his men caught night horses that they staked out near camp. There was always that odd chance that the nighthawk might get set afoot by a fall or for some reason lose his remuda. The night horses would keep the outfit from being set afoot, Baldy explained. It looked a little like a storm coming. A few thunderhead clouds had shoved up over the broken skyline about dusk.

"If it comes a storm, Skeeter," Baldy told him, "I'll send out a man or two to help you hold 'em."

Skeeter nodded and let the horses out of the rope corral. He shoved them up the big wash as the first shadows of night crept into the canyons. He had the cedar-handled six-shooter shoved in the pocket of his

chaps now and his right hand gripped its butt. His nerves seemed as taut as fiddlestrings.

He had the remuda grazing where Ray Shaw had told him to be. He saw the evening star show. Seconds seemed hours. Other stars began showing in the sky. There were patches of black clouds and he heard the faraway rumble of thunder. There was a storm coming. It would hit in an hour or two.

Skeeter wondered what was keeping Ray Shaw. This waiting was making him jumpy. It was one thing to make a decision and have the climax come swiftly. This waiting was another thing altogether. It made him spooky. Every sound, every shadow held danger. What if Ray Shaw had men with him? Big Ears, Weasel Smith, Nig? They'd have him in a bear trap, for sure.

The moon was coming up and he could almost get a count on the horses, the light was that good. He reckoned it had been an hour since nightfall. What was keeping Shaw, anyhow?

Then his heart seemed to stop beating. Ray Shaw rode into sight, coming from the direction of camp.

"Figgered you might have bin damn fool enough to squeal and they'd have a trap set," Shaw growled. "So I just took a good look-see around. Them Muleshoe punchers is bedded down. We'll ease the cavvy up the wash a mile or so before we jerk the bells off—"

"Claw for the moon, Shaw, or I'll kill yuh!" Skeeter's six-shooter was in his hand. "I'll shoot your yellow belly off if you make a move at your gun!"

Skeeter's voice sounded weak and shaky in his own ears. But he saw the look of fear on Ray Shaw's face as he lifted his hands up to the level of his shoulders.

"You damned young whelp! You're spooky enough to do it. What the hell kind of a game you pullin'?"

"You kin use your left hand to handle your bridle reins. Head for camp. I'll be right behind, and if you drop your right hand I'll shoot you in the back. Ride at a trot. Git goin'."

Skeeter's voice had lost its weak, unsteady tremor. He had Ray Shaw scared. He remembered Tom Dwyer saying that Shaw would show a yellow streak in a tight.

"You got nothin' on me, you damned young fool. You'll git the worst of this. I'll tell the wide world you're wanted for murder—"

"Git goin', Shaw. I got 'er all figgered out. I'll go to the pen anyhow. Shootin' you won't bother me none. Travel."

RAY SHAW did as he was told. He kept his right arm raised, reining his horse with his left hand. Skeeter, his cocked gun in his hand, followed about ten feet behind.

The trail twisted through patches of brush and boulders. Ahead was a brush patch that was in the black shadow. The trail led into it. As Ray Shaw rode through it, he was hidden by the shadow. Skeeter could barely make him out. He saw Shaw's right arm drop. The horse thief raked his horse with the spurs, bending low across the saddlehorn. The flash of Shaw's gun ripped the dark shadow. Skeeter's six-shooter roared, and Shaw let out a howl. As his horse bolted out of the brush and into a patch of moonlight, Skeeter saw the man's right arm flopping crazily.

"Don't shoot!" yelled Shaw. "You got me! You damned little coyote whelp! You shot me!"

"Pull up or I'll kill yuh!" Skeeter

yelled at the top of his lungs. "Pull up, I tell yuh!"

Ray Shaw managed to pull his lunging horse to a halt, his face a pale yellow in the moonlight, his mouth grimacing. There was no gun in his dangling right hand. Skeeter's bullet had smashed through his shoulder.

Baldy and the others were mounted and starting away from camp when Skeeter herded his wounded prisoner into sight.

"What the hell's goin' on, button?" called Baldy. "Hell, it's that horse-spillin' nighthawk you got there!"

"He propositioned me to help him steal the remuda," said Skeeter. "He tried to git away and I had to shoot him. He'll bust down and talk the truth if you bear down on 'im. There's a newspaper in Lon's warsack. The paper Gimpy seen. It tells about me killin' my stepdad, Tom Dwyer. But tell Lon it's a big damn lie, but I can't prove it. So I got to drift yonderly. So long."

Skeeter reined the Zebra dun and rode off at a lope. He could hear Baldy and old Gimpy calling to him to come back, but he kept going. A big raindrop spattered against his face. There was the flash of chain lightning and the deafening roar of thunder as the storm broke. Skeeter lowered his head against the driving sheet of rain. There was a tight lump in his throat as he headed into the storm.

CHAPTER VI

ON THE DODGE

A MAN on the dodge has to go cautiously. He has to feel his way along when he is on a strange range or he may shove his head into a noose. Skeeter had heard Tom Dwyer and other men talk about it until he knew all the answers. You stayed clear of towns and ranches and camps. If you ran short of grub you could rope a calf and knock it on the head with a rock, cut its throat and butcher it. Jerk the meat. All a man needed when he was playing wolf was a sack of salt and a jackknife.

Skeeter had his bag of meat sandwiches and his bottle of coffee. But the rain sort of damaged the bread, so he threw it away and kept the meat. The storm came from the east and when he had bucked it for perhaps half an hour he let the big dun swing its rump around and travel with the wind and rain at their backs. It was pitch black now except when the lightning ripped the sky and everything was brighter than daylight.

It must have been midnight when the dun horse, following a rain-soaked trail, took him to a ranch that looked deserted. The barbwire fence was down in many places, a broken pole gate sagged open. The windowpanes in the small log cabin were broken and the door blown open by the wind. The barn roof was sagging, badly in need of mending. But the place was a temporary shelter for him and his horse.

Off a way from the log barn was a shed that seemed in better shape than the other buildings. Skeeter stabled his horse there, loosening the saddle cinch and fetching a couple of armfuls of hay from the little that remained in the barn loft. He was up there after another armful when he heard the sloshing of shod hoofs in the mud outside.

Peering cautiously from the loft window, he waited for the next flash of lightning to show him the riders whose voices he heard but indistinctly as they rode up. His gun

was in his hand. His nerves were pulled tight.

The lightning flared and thunder crashed. Skeeter stifled the sharp exclamation of alarm that tore at his dry throat. His eyes stared at the three riders who had pulled up at the doorway of the log barn. Big Ears! Weasel Smith! Nig!

They rode into the barn to get out of the rain. Big Ears was cussing, his voice rasping.

"This'll do till the rain stops. Can't do a damn thing in the storm, nohow. I told you we was fools to trust Ray Shaw with a job like that. We needed them horses. Why didn't he knock that kid in the head to start with?"

"Why didn't he hold his night-hawkin' job like he was supposed to? We'd have bin settin' purty." That was Weasel's thin, nasal voice.

"No use a-frettin' over milk that's done spilt," sounded Nig's deep-throated drawl. "Them Muleshoe horses would sho' have bin the ticket. The sorriest horse in that remuda is fast enough to Pony Express the mail. And, misters, what us needs is sho' enough fast ponies fo' that gitaway."

"You plumb certain, Weasel, that that damn kid of Dwyer's taken Shaw to camp?" growled Big Ears.

"I tell yuh I was planted so close to the Muleshoe camp I could have throwed a rock and hit the dutch ovens. There was shootin' and them cowboys come outa their blankets like they'd found their beds full of sidewinders. They're ready to pull out when the button herds Shaw into camp with a six-shooter. I got my horse and hightailed it before they got to lookin' around. Where we goin' to git fast horses, Big Ears?"

"We'll raid the Flyin' U horse pasture as soon as this storm lets up and the moon comes out," Big Ears said. "Them Flyin' U horses ain't what you'd call cripples. We'll be mounted when we leave Prescott. And we'll have a relay of horses planted along the route."

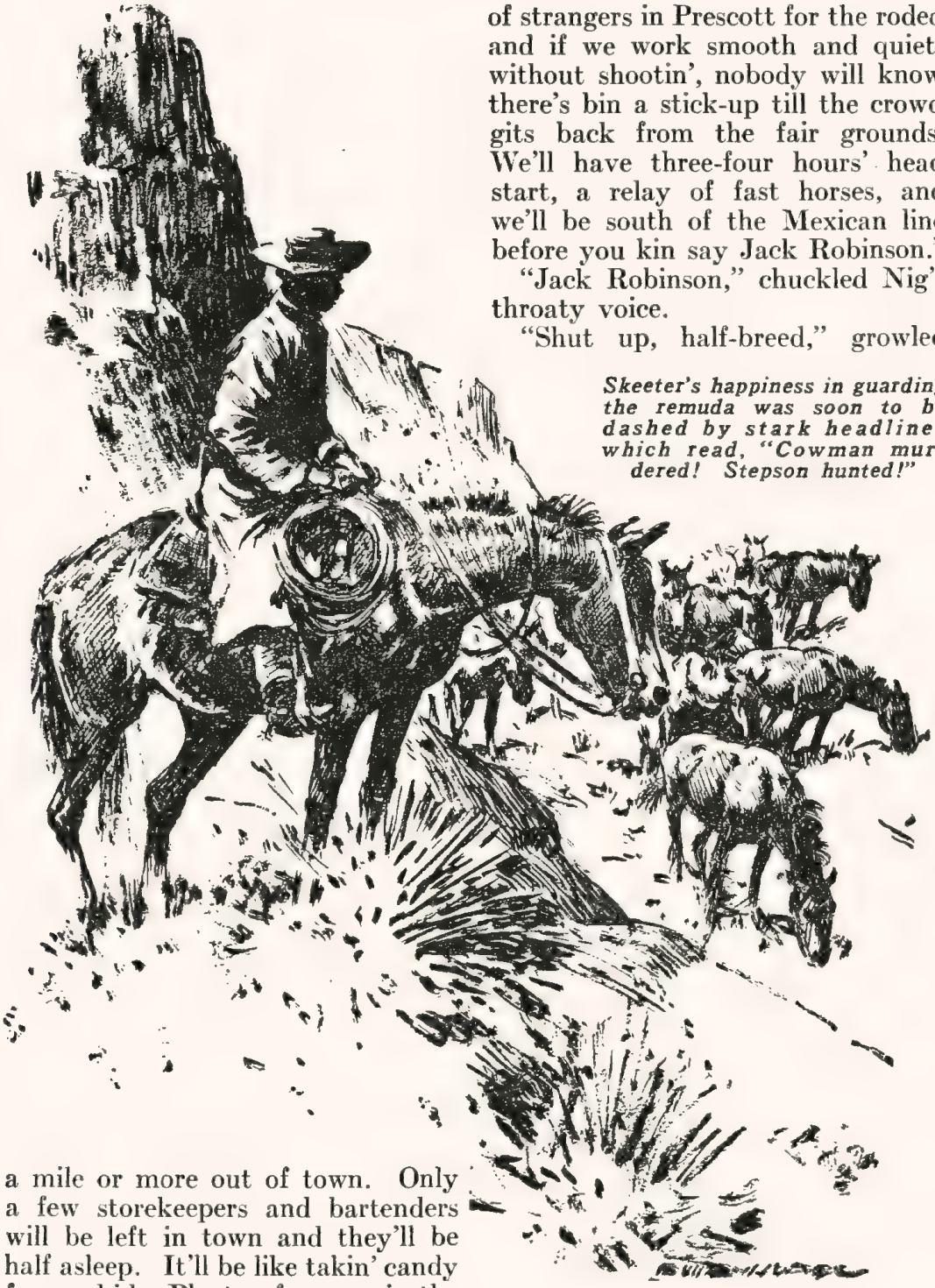
BAD luck commenced down yonder south of 'at border," complained Nig, "when I lost 'at ol' rabbit foot I done packed fo' ten years. What happened the next night, huh? We propositions Tom Dwyer on 'is heah bank-robbin' job at Prescott, an' he says no dice, says he won't have no truck with ary bank-holdup jobs. He's stickin' to wet cattle fo' to make his South America stake. So we ups and kills Tom fo' to shet his mouth fo' keeps. Cain't be havin' nobody runnin' loose that knows what us is aimin' to do when 'at ol' Prescott Frontier Days Rodeo starts the first day of Ju-ly. We makes a big mistake when we don't kill off 'at Skeeter kid."

"The hell we did!" Big Ears' tone was an ugly growl. "We got the law a-believin' the kid killed Tom Dwyer, ain't we? Throws 'em off our trail. The law will hamstring that button when they ketch 'im."

"But they ain't kotched him," drawled Nig. " 'At Skeeter boy sho' takes after his daddy. You mind how 'at Harry Roberts fit us when we boys shot him from the brush? Belly full of lead an' he dies a-fightin'. Tom Dwyer, he wouldn't he'p us none on 'at job, neither."

"Shut up, Nig," Weasel Smith's nasal whine was like a snarl. "Can't you two quit a-harpin' on what's bin done. What's the best time to hit Prescott, Big Ears?"

"About two o'clock. The parade is at noon. That takes an hour. The rodeo begins at two. Everybody in town will be out at the fair grounds



Skeeter's happiness in guarding the remuda was soon to be dashed by stark headlines which read, "Cowman murdered! Stepson hunted!"

of strangers in Prescott for the rodeo and if we work smooth and quiet, without shootin', nobody will know there's bin a stick-up till the crowd gits back from the fair grounds. We'll have three-four hours' head start, a relay of fast horses, and we'll be south of the Mexican line before you kin say Jack Robinson."

"Jack Robinson," chuckled Nig's throaty voice.

"Shut up, half-breed," growled Big Ears. "You ain't comical, drunk or sober."

"The storm's slackin'," said Weasel Smith. "Rain's about quit. We got them horses to manage for a mile or more out of town. Only a few storekeepers and bartenders will be left in town and they'll be half asleep. It'll be like takin' candy from a kid. Plenty of money in the bank on account of it bein' rodeo time.

"We just ride in, collect the dough, lock the bank clerks in the vault and ride outa town. Plenty

and it's a long ride to Prescott. We can't git nothin' done a-stayin' here."

Skeeter's grip on his gun slacked as he heard them ride off into the night. His fingers were cramped from his tight grip on the gun. His quivering nerves relaxed.

"I mighta got two of 'em," he told himself. "But the sign wasn't right."

Those men had killed Harry Roberts, his father, murdered him as they had murdered Tom Dwyer. Skeeter's memory of his father was a little dim. He recalled the funeral there in a little Texas border town. After the funeral, his mother, her eyes red from weeping, her slim figure all in black, had gone to the depot to get tickets for the train that would take them to Kansas where she had an aunt whom they were going to live with.

Skeeter, left alone in the dingy boarding house room he and his mother had occupied during the day or so before the funeral, had opened their packed trunk with difficulty and pulled out his dad's worn belongings. He had put his feet in the huge spurred boots and tried to fasten the gun belt around his little waist. But the belt was big enough to fit around Skeeter and another button his size, so he had slung it across one shoulder and let the holster hang over his right thigh. With a huge-brimmed Stetson pushed far back on his head to keep it out of his eyes and his father's big, smooth-handled six-shooter in his hand, he had pretended that he was a Texas Ranger, on the trail of his father's bushwhacker.

In the middle of his game his mother had showed up with Tom Dwyer. Tom had given him a big sackful of stick candy and gumdrops, and his mother told him that they didn't have to go to Kansas to live with her old maid aunt. Tom Dwyer knew a restaurant at Nogales that would give her a good job as sort of cashier and manager. Skeeter had shaken hands gravely with big Tom Dwyer, who had grinned and slapped him on the back and poked a thumb in his ribs and promised to make a real cowpuncher out of him. That was before he savvied the ornery side of Tom Dwyer.

But Tom hadn't bushwhacked Harry Roberts. And he had been killed because he wouldn't turn bank robber. After all, lots of men who called themselves honest cowmen were dealing in stolen Mexican cattle. Stealing from the big Mexican outfits didn't count as law-breaking with a man born and reared in Texas.

SKEETER had let the three killers ride away without firing a single shot. It hadn't been his play, that was all. But it was up to him now to outfox 'em. He had overheard their plans. The Prescott Frontier Days Rodeo was starting tomorrow. The boy had almost forgotten about it.

Baldy had mentioned that he and a few of the other boys would be going into town, but with things happening so fast, it had slipped Skeeter's mind.

But Lon would be there, he realized now. Lon would be roping, too. Winning money, maybe busting world's records. Skeeter had never been to a big cowboy contest like the one held every year at Prescott. Well, he'd be in Prescott, all right, but he wouldn't see the show. Not unless you could see the grounds from the jail window.

It hadn't taken the boy long to

come to a decision. He was wanted for murder. The sheriff would have his description and a bench warrant for his arrest. But that wasn't stopping Skeeter. He was riding to Prescott to take word to the sheriff that three tough cowhands were going to rob the bank at two that day.

He'd set a bear trap for Big Ears, Weasel Smith and Nig. That was Skeeter's only bet. It meant violating all that Tom Dwyer had taught him about squealing to the law. It was taking a cowardly way to get square with the three men who had murdered his father and Tom Dwyer. But time was short and there was no other way to fight the three killers. It was what Lon Lonigan would want him to do, even though it meant prison for him.

Skeeter knew that Big Ears, Weasel Smith and Nig would fight. They were all wanted for murder and rustling. He had heard them tell Tom Dwyer that the law would never take them alive. They would be killed. And with them dead, Skeeter's chances of proving he had not killed Tom Dwyer wouldn't be worth a dime.

But it was what Lon would want him to do. Skeeter was going to do it, regardless.

"Mebbyso," he told himself as he climbed down from the barn loft and went to the shed to get his horse, "me bein' just a li'le ol' button, the sheriff will put handcuffs and leg irons on me and take me out to the grounds so's I kin watch Lon rope."

CHAPTER VII

DEATH FOR THREE KILLERS

THE Zebra dun was big and tough. Skeeter was light and knew how to get the most miles out of a horse without tiring the animal. He knew the general direction of Prescott. Taking his bearings from the stars when the storm clouds cleared, he began his grim, heavy-hearted ride. Perhaps, he kept thinking, it was the last ride ahorseback he would ever take. He was giving himself up to the law and that law either hanged a man or gave him a life stretch for murder.

The sun rose in a clear sky and something of the depressing, leaden heaviness left Skeeter's heart as the sun dried his damp clothes and warmed his chilled body. He stopped at a ranch along the wagon road he had found and asked a Mexican ranch hand who seemed to be the only human being on the place if this was the road to Prescott.

The Mexican told him that it was the road and asked him if he was going to the rodeo. Skeeter said yes, that he aimed to see a part of it. That part of it, he told himself when he hit the road again, that he could sight from his jail cell.

He had long since eaten the last of his meat and washed it down with creek water. He passed wagons and buckboards that were carrying women and kids to town. He swung around horsebackers whenever he could. They were few and far between because nearly all the cowpunchers had gone to Prescott the previous day to get entered in today's contests.

Riding against time, it seemed to Skeeter that the big dun horse was slower than a snail. He had only the sun by which to judge what time it was and when it seemed that it must be midafternoon he rode through a sort of pass between giant granite boulders and past Fort Whipple at the edge of town.

The town seemed dead. Skeeter sighted the big stone building that he reckoned was the courthouse. Save for a few stragglers on foot and per-

haps half a dozen horses tied to the hitch racks in front of the saloons, the town was certainly deserted. He dismounted and, leaving Zebra at a hitch rack, went up the courthouse steps. He passed windows on a level with the sidewalk. Windows with iron bars.

Men inside, hanging onto the bars, called out to him, asking him for a cigarette. One of them was drunk and hollering. That was the jail. Skeeter shivered a little as he ran up the wide granite steps.

A white-haired old-timer with a lot of keys on a big ring and a six-shooter strapped on his flank was the only man in the sheriff's office. He was dozing in a big armchair, his booted feet on the desk. The hands of the big clock told Skeeter the time. One thirty.

"I got to see the sheriff right now!" Skeeter panted. "Are you him?"

"Killed somebody, son?" The old jailer pushed his hat from his face. He blinked, rubbed the back of a gnarled hand across his faded blue eyes, swung his feet to the floor and stared.

"What the hell ails you, son? Sick? Your face is the damnedest green color that ever I see. Your hair—"

"Are you the sheriff?" Skeeter's voice cracked.

"Hell, no. Just actin' jailer. Sheriff's out at the grounds. He's one of the judges. Is there anything I kin git you? Looks like you need a doctor, not the sheriff."

Skeeter bolted. He swung aboard the big dun and rode down the street aptly named Whiskey Row. As he passed the line of saloons he caught a sidelong glimpse of two tipsy old cowpunchers. They were weaving a lurching course through the swinging half-doors of the Palace, headed for the open air. One of them was supporting the other. They saw Skeeter.

"Skeeter!" one of them shouted, his voice blurred by whiskey. "You green-topped young bonehead! Come back here. You, Skeeter button! Come 'ere!"

SKEETER turned halfway in his saddle and waved his hat. He had recognized the pair. Gimpy and old Chiz. Chiz with a hospital nightshirt partly tucked in the waistband of his overalls. Skeeter guessed rightly that the old son of a gun had run away from the hospital. Aided in his escape, no doubt, by Gimpy and a bottle of whiskey.

They were warning him, Skeeter reckoned, to get the hell out of town before the law grabbed him. He grinned grimly. They didn't guess the half of it. He headed for the fair grounds at a long lope. The Zebra dun was game.

Skeeter swung around the grandstand. He headed for the corrals and bucking chutes and tall judges' stand. A man with a badge yelled at him, asking him if he was contesting. If he wasn't to get back where he belonged.

Skeeter spurred the Zebra dun past him and dodged through little groups of men sitting their horses near the chutes. Pick-up men and contestants. No time to look around for Lon. A man on horseback was bellowing in a leather-lunged voice through a megaphone. Skeeter slid his dun horse to a halt in front of the judges' stand. He had to yell two or three times to get the attention of the men up there.

"Sheriff!" Skeeter jerked off his hat and waved it. "Sheriff!"

A big man in a large gray Stetson leaned over the edge of the judges' stand, looking down from his

twenty-foot perch. He sighted the green thatch and green-streaked face and grinned good-naturedly.

"We done hired our arena clown, son!" he called down. "If you want a job, tackle Lon Lonigan, the arena director. That's him yonder on the roan horse." The sheriff turned back, a program and pencil in his hand, to the other men in the judges' stand.

Skeeter wanted to bawl. He sighted Lon loping across from the grandstand and rode to head him off.

"Lon!" Skeeter's voice was shrill. "Lon!"

Lon pulled up. He sighted Skeeter and waved, pulling to a halt.

"Why you doggoned li'le ol' rannihan, what—"

"Git the sheriff, Lon! Quick or it'll be too late! They're robbin' the bank at two. It's damn near that now. Git 'im quick, Lon! It's Big Ears an' Weasel an' Nig. They're in town right now, I reckon. We gotta git 'em!"

"I'll tell a man! Stay here, pardner!"

Lon spurred toward the judges' stand, his horse on a run. He called up to the sheriff.

"Git your horse, sheriff. Rattle your hocks. Not a second to lose."

Sheriff George Ruffner came down the steep ladderlike stairs like a fireman sliding down his brass pole.

"What's the rip, Lon?"

"Bank holdup. Fetch what deputies are handy. No use lettin' the crowd know. Might panic 'em." Lon rode in behind the chutes, Skeeter right behind him. Skeeter sighted Baldy and a couple of other Muleshoe cowhands.

"Fork your horses, Baldy. Don't come if you ain't heeled. It'll be shootin' work. Rattle your hocks. Stay here, Skeeter. Stay here at the grounds where you won't git hurt!"

Lon and the sheriff, followed by Baldy and two Muleshoe men and a couple of cowpuncher deputies, headed for town, their horses on a run. Skeeter followed, hidden by the screen of dust kicked up by their horses. The Zebra dun had come about seventy miles and the best his game heart and weary legs could give his rider was a slow lope.

But they weren't leaving him out of that fight, Skeeter told himself as he trailed them, half-choked by the thick yellow dust. That big sheriff calling him a clown. Lon telling him to stay back at the fair grounds. Hell of a way to treat a man. After him making an all-night ride and tipping 'em off, they ride off and leave him. Stay out of this ruckus? Not if the Zebra dun could take him there in time.

BIG EARS, Weasel Smith, and Nig rode unobtrusively into town. Save for the fact that their faces were covered with heavy beards and that they had carbines shoved in their saddle scabbards they could pass for three cowpunchers come to Prescott for the rodeo. Even if there had been anybody to take notice of them, they would have gotten no more than a casual second glance, aroused no suspicion. But the town was emptied, it seemed, of all its citizens.

"A man could shoot a gatlin' gun down the street," grinned Big Ears, "and hit nothin' but them two ol' drunks yonder in front of the Palace Saloon. There's the bank, gents. Nig, you hold the horses. Me and Weasel will be comin' outa that bank directly with more money in a gunny sack than we all of us put together ever seen in our lives. There ain't enough men left in town to

start a five-handed poker game. A man could cut hisself a hick'ry club and rob yonder bank single-handed." Big Ears had a big quid of plug tobacco in his mouth. He grinned and sprayed the street with brown juice.

"If I had 'at ol' rabbit foot to rub fo' luck," muttered Nig, "I'd sho' feel like Christmas done come early this year. 'At ol' rabbit foot got lost—"

"Dry up," snapped Weasel Smith. "All you got to do is hold our horses. Me 'n' Big Ears do the sweatin'."

"Ary man 'at wants it," said the pale-eyed killer, "kin have 'at ol' hoss-holdin' chore. Gimme action instead of waitin' on the outside. Ary man say 'at outside job is safest, he's sho' locoed crazy."

"We matched for it," grunted Big Ears. "Me 'n' Weasel turned heads. You flipped tails. Quit your belly-achin'."

They pulled up in front of the bank. Big Ears and Weasel stepped off their horses and handed their bridle reins to Nig who sat his horse, his weight in one stirrup, his six-shooter in his right hand, holding the gun out of sight between the saddle pommel and his belly. Weasel had a rolled gunny sack under his left arm.

"Don' take no beer checks er wooden nickels," said Nig, his pale eyes restless, big white teeth showing in an evil, mirthless grin.

"Just pickin' up change," grinned Big Ears, "fer to buy baby new shoes." He stalked into the bank, chaps swishing, spurs jingling, boot heels clicking, a six-shooter in each hand. Weasel Smith was right behind him.

"Wake up an stretch your arms high, you white-collared dudes!" barked Big Ears. "It's pay day!"

Outside, Nig's restless eyes spotted a rapidly moving dust cloud coming toward town from the direction of the rodeo grounds. Half a dozen riders were coming. They split into pairs. Two riders came down the main road, the two other pairs rode off at angles, spreading out.

"Rattle your hocks in there, Big Ears!" called Nig, his voice harsh with alarm. "Hossbackers a-comin' like bats outa hell!"

Over in front of the Palace Saloon Gimpy and old Chiz sat down in big barroom chairs. Chiz chuckled as the old roundup cook handed him a partly emptied bottle.

"Gimpy, you no account ol' grub-spoiler, we shore give them hospital things the slip. You git us a top buggy and we'll drive out to the grounds and watch Lon bust his own record a-ropin'. Must be some Flyin' U cowboys in town. That feller settin' his pony by the bank, a-holdin' them other two horses, is forkin' a Flyin' U geldin' I swapped off to their ramrod last fall. Them other two is Flyin' U horses, likewise. Let's call 'em over fer a drink. Can't make out who the feller is—"

"Chiz," said Gimpy, "I just can't git over the way that Skeeter button acted. He recognized us, but he passed us up like we was a couple of dirty white chips. Fogged through town like he was a Pony Express rider a-carryin' the mail. Say, who's that a-comin' yonder? Looks like Sheriff Ruffner, and he's ridin' like he was late fer somethin'. Ain't that Lon with him?"

"If they're comin' to put me back in that hospital, they got another guess a-comin'," said Chiz. "Look close. Behind 'em. It's the Skeeter yearlin' on the Zebra dun. Gimpy, I'm a little full and that damn hospital has kinda slowed down my

thinkin'. What would you make of that race a-comin'?"

"Big Ears! Weasel!" Nig's voice was a deep-throated bellow. "Git outa there! The law's a-comin'!"

TWO deputies blocked one way out of town. Two Muleshoe cowpunchers guarded another road. Lon Lonigan and Sheriff George Ruffner rode straight toward the bank. A hundred yards behind them came Skeeter.

Big Ears and Weasel came out of the bank on the run. Weasel was lugging a gunny sack that had gold and silver and paper money in it. They swung into their saddles without touching stirrups. Big Ears was cursing. He pointed with his gun.

"Cut across in front of the courthouse. That's the road south. Down Whiskey Row. Past them two ol' drunks. There's two riders blockin' the road. Kill 'em. Gimme that sack." He shoved one of his guns into its holster and grabbed the sack of money from Weasel Smith.

They spurred their horses to a run. They had to pass between the Palace Saloon and the courthouse, cutting across the plaza in front of the courthouse, past the bandstand and the big bronze equestrian statue of Prescott's Rough Rider Spanish-American War hero.

"You a-sightin' what I do, Gimpy?" asked Chiz, pulling his six-shooter as he lurched to his feet.

"I ain't no law-abider, Chiz. But I'm addin' the tally fast and if that ain't the three snakes Ray Shaw squealed about, I'm shore throwin' lead at the wrong parties. It ain't bank robbin' I'm holdin' agin' them three jaspers. Here's turnin' 'em back fer the sheriff!"

Gimpy's six-shooter roared. His bullet missed Nig's head by inches. Then he and Chiz were shooting as fast as they could thumb back the hammers of their guns. The two Muleshoe cowpunchers blocking the road at the south end of Whiskey Row were coming now at a hard lope.

A hail of bullets spattered around Chiz and Gimpy. The three outlaws whirled their horses. The sheriff and Lon came at them, their guns spitting fire. Big Ears, Weasel Smith and Nig were trapped.

Big Ears dropped the sack of money. Bridle reins clamped between his bared, tobacco-stained teeth, he had a belching gun in each hand. He sighted Skeeter coming up behind the sheriff and Lon. Blind, red hatred congested his eyes. He shot at Skeeter. The boy felt the burning sting of a bullet as it nicked his cheek.

Lon Lonigan's six-shooter spewed flame. Big Ears swayed in his saddle and pitched sideways, blood spilling from his gaping mouth as he struck the ground.

Weasel Smith whirled his horse and took another direction. Bullets crashed into his ribs as the two deputies cut him down. Nig had been shot from his saddle and lay writhing and howling in the dusty street, begging for mercy.

Big Ears and Weasel Smith were dead. Nig was dying. The gun fight had ended as swiftly as it had begun.

Chiz sat back in his chair, a grin on his leathery face. He ejected the empty shells from his smoking gun and blew the smoke from the muzzle.

"There's no ca'tridges in these overalls you taken off that drunk feller, Gimpy. Lemme have about a handful. I might have to put up a argument if them hospital things show up here."

"We shore turned them three snakes back, eh, Chiz?" chuckled old Gimpy, picking up the bottle he had set behind his chair. "Listen to that un layin' yonder in the dirt. He sounds like a bawlin' calf."

CHAPTER VIII

PARDNERS!

SHERIFF RUFFNER and Lon had quit their horses and were bending over the dying Nig. They asked him a few blunt, sharp-worded questions. The yellow-skinned quadroon killer replied, his pale-gray eyes rolling.

"We done it, sheriff—me an' Big Ears an' Weasel. We done killed Tom Dwyer. Killed 'at Skeeter's daddy, Harry Roberts, when he kotched us stealin' Turkey Track hosses. Fotch me a drink. I done knowed I was a-goin' to git it when I lost 'at ol' rabbit foot. Fotch me a drink."

Nig's voice choked and blood poured from his mouth. He was dead when Skeeter, his gun gripped in his hand, rode up. Blood trickled from the bullet cut on the boy's cheek.

Skeeter's heart was thumping like a trip hammer against his ribs. He had seen Big Ears and Weasel Smith killed. Now he saw Nig die. There was no man left alive now to prove to the law that Skeeter Roberts had not killed Tom Dwyer.

Sheriff George Ruffner was looking at him, smiling oddly. He held his hand toward the boy.

Skeeter's jaw muscles quivered as he took his six-shooter by its long barrel and handed its notched cedar butt toward the big law officer.

The sheriff took the gun and shifted it to the left hand. His big right hand was still extended.

"They might come bigger than you are, son," he said, "but they don't come any gamer. I'd be proud to have you shake on it."

Skeeter was bewildered by the way they were treating him. The sheriff handed him back his gun. Lon told him he was shot and bleeding like a stuck pig and maybe they had some soda pop at the Palace that would ease the pain and wash the dust out of his throat. Baldy, his arm broken by a bullet, slapped him on the back and told Lon he reckoned the green-topped little button would have to take his place in the team-tying. Gimpy and old Chiz drank his health.

Chiz had considerable trouble with his "borrowed" overalls that were much too big around the waist. He kept tucking in the tail of his hospital nightshirt and telling Lon that he'd shoot the button off any hospital thing that tried to get him back into bed because he and Gimpy were driving out to the grounds in a top buggy with a case of beer to keep 'em cooled off.

The sheriff came into the Palace with the president of the bank. The banker shook Skeeter's hand and told him that the reward he had coming would pay for his schooling. The sheriff added that the bounty on the heads of the three dead outlaws belonged to Skeeter and nobody else. It was all too much for the boy's dazed, bewildered mind to get straightened out. He was glad when Lon said they'd have to get back out to the grounds.

LON and Skeeter rode at a running walk back to the fair grounds. Lon told him that Ray Shaw knew all about the killing of Tom Dwyer and had cleared him of the murder charge. And that Nig had

confessed to the sheriff before he died. Shaw would go to the pen for horse stealing.

"Them rewards," he told Skeeter, "will tally up to three thousand dollars or more. You got a real grubstake, pardner. It'll put you through college."

"I'd rather git me a ranch with it. Just a li'le ol' place where Chiz an' Gimpy could be pardners with me—"

"You wouldn't cut me in on that, I don't reckon," said Lon. "I got a place near enough to town so's you could ride back and forth to school. A little bunch of cattle and a few horses. I'd stake you to a half interest in it. Chiz and Gimpy could run it while you're at school and I'm makin' some of the contests around the country. How's that strike you, pardner?"

Skeeter tried to say something but that lump stuck in his throat. He could only nod his head and grin. He was afraid he was going to bawl like a kid.

The leather-lunged man with the megaphone was making an announcement when they rode up. Skeeter heard his name barked through the megaphone and then he had to ride out with the sheriff and Lon. The crowd cheered him wildly. His face felt hot under the white bandage across his cheek.

"Give 'em a bow, button," said the sheriff. "Wave your hat to the crowd. There's nothin' to be scared of."

Skeeter took off his hat and waved it. The sun shone on his green hair, and the crowd cheered until the hills flung back the echoes. Suddenly remembering the color of his hair, Skeeter clamped his hat far down on his head.

Lon said something to the man with the megaphone. As Skeeter rode back toward the chutes with Lon, he heard the loud announcement:

"Baldy Black, Lon Lonigan's pardner in the team-tyin', was shot during the fight with the bank robbers! Lon has asked me to announce that Skeeter Roberts will take Baldy's place! Skeeter will team-tie with Lon today and every day during the contest!"

"Gosh!" gasped Skeeter. "Gosh, Lon, I'll just slow you down. I can't cut 'er."

Lon grinned at him. "You'll cut 'er, button. Mebbyso today you'll be kinda nervous. Tomorrow you'll rope like an old hand. The boys fetched some horses to town. Your Little Brown Jug pony is in the corral yonder. You kin put your saddle on him. Tomorrow the Zebra dun will be rested plenty. He's the best rope horse, barrin' Roan Mike here, in the country. I'd orter know, button. He's yourn now. But till Tom Dwyer stole him from the feed barn at Nogales, he belonged to me. I broke Zebra and trained him. That's my brand that Tom blotched on his left thigh—"

"You knowed when I rode up to the outfit that—"

"Shore thing, button. I thought I was seein' things, for shore. He's your horse from now on. What I can't teach you about cowpunchin', the Zebra dun will. By the way, young feller, Gimpy fetched my warsack to town. There was a thousand dollars in a salt sack wrapped up in that Nogales newspaper."

"It was money that belonged to Tom Dwyer, Lon. When he was killed, I taken it. But I couldn't keep it. You see, I'd got them notions about bein' tough like Billy the Kid outa my head."

"So I figured. I've got the money here in my pocket. No matter how Tom Dwyer come by that money, there's nobody to claim it. So I tell you what I'm goin' to do. There's some fast cowboys entered in the team-tyin' contest. They're out to clean me, button, and they're bettin' heavy. So I'm bettin' this Tom Dwyer money that you and me beat 'em all. So Skeeter, pardner, we'd better be good." Lon headed for a group of cowmen and contestants near the judges' stand. He waved a handful of bills.

"I got a thousand dollars that says me and Skeeter Roberts wins the team-tyin'. Don't call it if you can't afford to take a losin'!"

GIMPY said it was too much to expect of the button. Chiz offered to bet his saddle against Gimpy's pothook that Skeeter would do as good a job as any old hand entered in the contest. Their betting finally simmered down to Gimpy's town shirt against Chiz's hospital nightshirt.

When they drove back to town that evening, Gimpy was wearing the hospital nightshirt. He wore it at the close of the next day's contest. Sunset of the Fourth of July, the final day of the contest, found the old roundup cook standing at the bar at the Palace, the tail of the hospital nightshirt hanging out over the waistband of his overalls. The garment was dust-powdered, stained by spilled beer. But Gimpy wore it with tipsy pride.

"Know what this here shirt represents?" he asked the question countless times of anyone who would listen. "Well, I'll tell you what it means, mister. It means that over yonder at the rodeo headquarters in the courthouse where they're payin' off right now, there's a new world's champeen roper in the makin'. He's got a bullet wound in his cheek and his hair is greener'n new alfalfa and his name is Skeeter Roberts. He's Lon Lonigan's pardner. That's who he is.

"Chiz, before them hospital things cut you down an' drag you off, tell the man about how Skeeter roped the hind laigs of that Calico outlaw steer. Tell the man about it, Chiz. He's a stranger in town. He'll buy us a drink. Then we'll tell him about the bank robbery. Then he'll buy another drink. Then you tell him how Lon an' Skeeter just busted some kind of a steer-ropin' team-tyin' record out at the fair grounds. And that, mister, is why that bandaged-up li'le ol' Muleshoe ramrod is a-soilin' of my town shirt and I got to wear this here sawed-off nightshirt that buttons up the back."

Lon and Skeeter, their prize money and side-bet winnings in their pockets, rode out to Lon's ranch at the foot of Thumb Butte. Lon rode Roan Mike. Skeeter forked the Zebra dun.

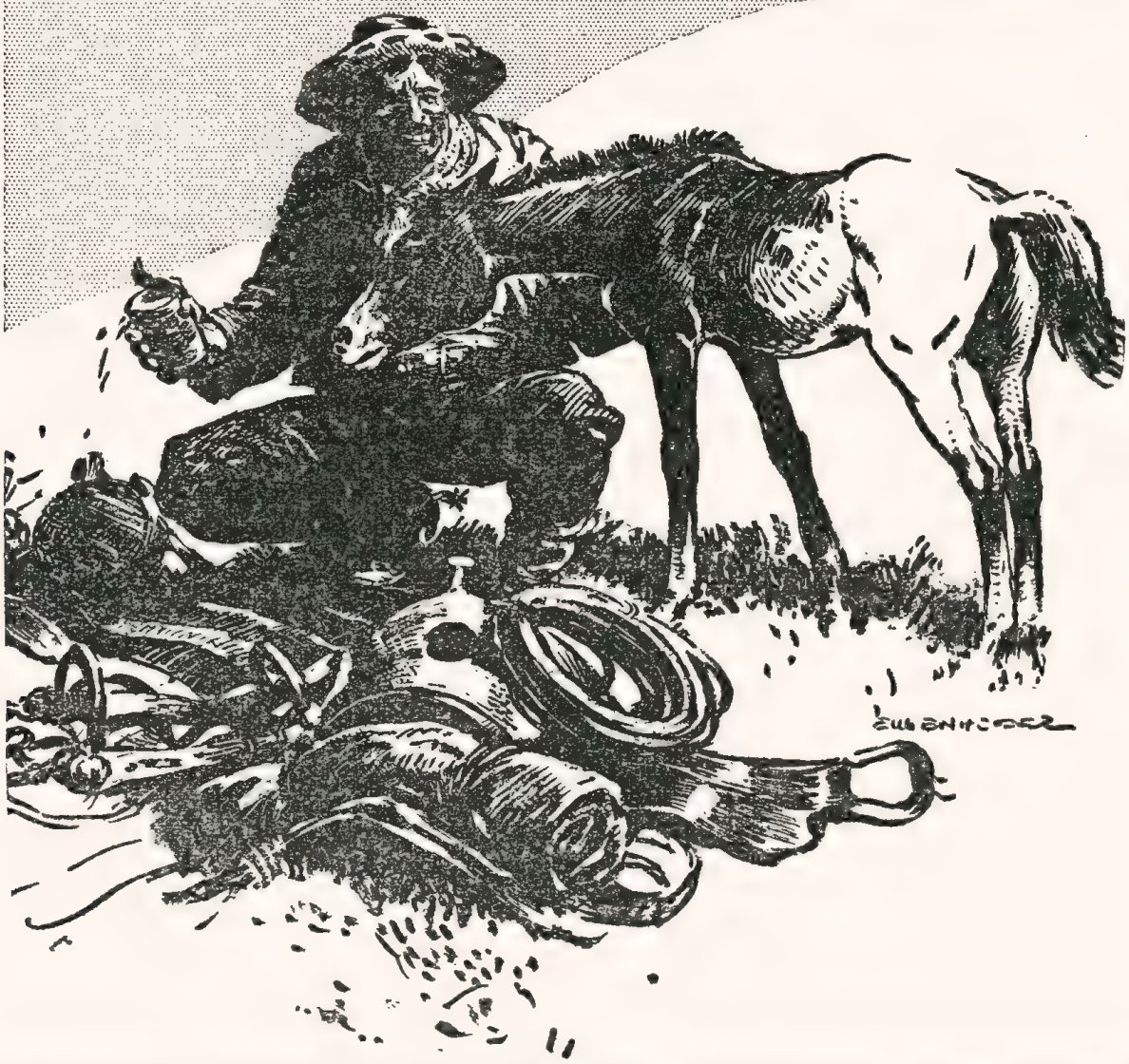
"Just once more, Skeeter," said Lon. "Sing 'er just once more. It's the one I sung to myself a long time ago, before you was born. When I quit my home range, an orphan poddie, to join the Sam Bass outlaw gang."

Skeeter sang, his voice low, clear as a silver bell.

"Sam Bass was born in Indiana, it was his native home,
And at the age of seventeen, young Sam began to roam.
Sam first come out to Texas, a cowboy for to be,
A kinder-hearted feller you seldom ever see."

THE END.

COLT ALIBI



by GUTHRIE BROWN

Colt Alibi

DIRK HOMAN rode out of the aspens on top of the rim. He halted his horse and studied the canyon below and the broad sweep of valley northward into which the canyon opened. Lean, dark, hard-eyed, he sat his mount with the ease of the true horseman, giving unconsciously to every move of the animal under him. The weathered saddle and bridle, the scarred boots, the hard-brimmed sombrero and stout leather jacket proclaimed him a seasoned Westerner. A four-day beard covered his rather grim jaw.

The beard was not neglect but design. Dirk Homan had discovered that hirsute adornment was the exact reverse of ornamental on him. It made him look about ten times as villainous as he ordinarily appeared. More than once it had proved of aid in the sort of enterprise upon which he was now embarked. The beard and a bandanna made a complete disguise.

Satisfied with his survey of the country, the bandit glanced calculatingly at the sun and saw that it had just passed the meridian. This seemed as good a place to wait as any. He dismounted, pulled the saddle from the back of his horse and picketed the animal.

Next he spread his saddle blanket on the ground and laid upon it a number of articles. He examined each in turn, felt it carefully, turned it from side to side, making certain that it was in just the condition that he desired.

First there was his gun, a pearl-handled, gold-mounted marksman's dream of a .45. Dirk Homan handled the weapon with honest affection. It was polished to a gleaming finish and was without mar or scratch. He slid it back into its holster carefully. He seldom used it in his business since he worked upon the theory that well-laid schemes should not demand gunplay.

Next there was the compact coil of three-eighths-inch rope with which he would tie up the express messenger. He had learned from careful study of certain railroad records that this particular messenger was a scrapper. The man had been recently transferred to the mountain division of the Denver & Pacific Western in the hope that he might put a stop to the robberies with which the division had been bedeviled. In the messenger's honor Homan had brought a brand-new coil of rope. When he finished examining it he put it aside with a twitch of sardonic satisfaction on his lips.

He next looked over a small, neat kit of perfectly machined, nickeled tools that any mechanic might covet. Inspection passed, he returned them to their buckskin case and tied it with a slip-knot. Rope and tools were deposited in his strapped-down saddle pocket.

Homan stood up to give the country another careful scrutiny, then stretched out on the ground, arms under his head. He lay without movement, watching the young aspen leaves tremble against the clear blue sky of a warm May day. He need not leave here, he reflected, until after dark. Two hours' ride would take him across the valley to meet the ten o'clock express at the Spring Creek water tank.

Where, Homan wondered with his grim little smile, would Rolf be by this time? There was one United States marshal who not only thought himself smart, but who *was* smart. Homan had never felt entirely easy

since Marshal Rolf had arrived in Buck Gulch two weeks before with the avowed purpose of stopping the train robberies for which the region had become notorious.

Not that the man lounging under the aspens held any monopoly on this particular branch of railroading. There was also the Coucher gang, which had several times spoiled Homan's plans for him. From the bandit's viewpoint, Rolf would do him a real service if he would rid the country of the Coucher gang.

Homan permitted himself a chuckle. He had contrived to give the watchful marshal the slip in Buck Gulch three nights ago. Rolf didn't have a thing on him, but the officer plainly had his suspicions of a man who lived so comfortably with any visible means of support. Homan could not help a feeling of satisfaction at having put one over on the astute marshal. Rolf was smart, all right—but not quite smart enough.

A SOUND, shrill and high, interrupted Homan's thoughts. It came upwind to him from along the rim. He sat up and listened. The noise came again, nearer, with a note of panic in it.

"A colt!" Homan muttered. "Musta strayed away from his mammy . . . just a little feller, from the sound of him."

The neighing of the colt was repeated at intervals. He was somewhere not far away, but out of sight, apparently rushing back and forth along the edge of the rim. Maybe he was trying to find a way down into the canyon.

Once the small animal flashed into view. He stood poised for a moment, staring at the seated man. He could not, Homan saw, be more than four or five days old. And he was the most oddly marked piece of horseflesh the bandit had ever seen. Hips, hind legs and half his barrel were white. Neck, forelegs and shoulders were brown, as were his mane and tail. The head was beautifully shaped and marked with a fine white star.

The little animal was gone on his wabbly legs as suddenly as he had come, returning to his chase along the rim and the voicing of his shrill plaint. Homan stood up. Where was the colt's mother, that she didn't answer him? He followed along the rim and through a belt of trees. At the top of the rim, a hundred yards ahead, the brown and white colt crouched, apparently about to leap down.

The sight startled Homan so much that he shouted a warning. He had heard of horses committing suicide, but had never before taken any stock in the stories. The gawky little animal backed away from the rim and eyed the man fearfully.

"What's the matter, bub?" Homan asked, and walked forward slowly. "Has that mammy of yours gone and left you flat? That ain't any way to treat a baby."

He stepped on the rock where the colt had been standing—and leaped back with an oath. The stone had leaned outward under his feet. A moment later it crashed into the bottom of the gulch. Breathing quickly from his scare, Homan examined the bluff and found the sandstone at this point honeycombed with fine cracks. Strong enough to support the colt, the rock had started to give way under Homan's weight.

He circled carefully around the rotten rock, and looked down into the canyon. At the foot of the rim lay a mare with a broken neck. The colt's mother had been caught in the trap which had almost caught

him. Homan looked from the dead mare to the foal, standing stiffly under the aspens.

"You poor little cuss!" he said sympathetically. "What're you gonna do for grub now? I got a can o' milk with me, but I don't reckon that'd go very far for you."

The bandit scratched his head. "Guess we better try it, though," he mused. "You look pretty ga'nted up."

It took nearly half an hour for Homan to convince the tiny horse that he wasn't going to be hurt. He made no attempt to rope the colt, but after repeated efforts he finally got close enough to catch him in his arms.

When the little fellow got tired of fighting, Homan stroked and talked to him. He let him suck on a hard brown thumb, while he scratched ear and shoulder gently and advised him not to be a little idiot. After a good deal of coaxing and muscular exertion, he led the animal to the place where he had left his saddle and pack.

First Homan tried dipping his thumb in the canned milk and letting the colt lick it off. He was forced to the conclusion that this was a pretty slow way of getting grub into a young horse, and he cast about for other means. What he needed was a bottle.

The bandit's face was a study, if there had been anyone present to see. He had a bottle—hell, yes! A perfectly good bottle. He took it out of its metal case and looked at its amber contents. Then he snapped the case shut again. Anyway, he didn't have a nipple.

The colt poked a soft pink nose into his hand, and Homan obediently dipped his thumb in the milk again. But couldn't he wrap something around the neck of the bottle, he wondered, so there would be no danger of its breaking?

"How much dental equipment you got, bub? From the feel o' my thumb it's enough to bust glass. Let's see, what could I use? Not my bandanna. I'm gonna need that. I've got it! I'll snip a piece off the tail o' my slicker. That oughta work pretty good, and won't soak up the milk, either.

"Well"—with a sigh he poured the contents of the bottle on the ground —"here goes. But that's powerful good whiskey to be poured out on the ground thisaway. Wait a minute, can't you?" he admonished the impatient foal. Then, a moment later, "Now, see what you've gone and done! Tipped over the milk can. Well, there goes your dinner in the dirt!"

The bundle of legs and silken fuzz beside Homan didn't seem to grasp the enormity of his offense. He continued to nuzzle the man and beg for more.

Homan looked at him with mild disgust. "I suppose that now I gotta go catch you a cow," he grunted. "I saw some with calves on Cedar Mesa as I came up this morning." He squinted at the sun. "I'll just about have time to do it. You got a nerve, butting into the arrangements of a highwayman like this. No, you ain't goin' along! You'll be in the way."

BUT the colt had no intention of losing his latest meal ticket, and Homan was afraid to tie him up. The little fool might break his neck.

"All right, Jimmy," he capitulated. "Come along and run your silly legs off. By gosh, I had the right idea when I said I'd never be bothered with a family."

But Jimmy's gangly legs couldn't

begin to keep up with the first cow which Homan picked out for his foster mother. In fact Homan's fleet mount could scarcely keep up with her. Jimmy came whickering a quarter mile in the rear of the dust cloud across the mesa and didn't catch up till Homan had roped and thrown the angry cow.

Homan dismounted, letting his horse hold the animal. He looked her over critically.

"Jimmy," he said thoughtfully, "I don't believe this cow's milk 'll do you any good. She's too het up and sweaty. Might make you sick. I'll pick out one with shorter legs, that can't run like a deer."

But cows with calves appeared to have deserted Cedar Mesa. They were frightened off no doubt by the chase of the cow Homan had roped. It was nearly sunset and at least ten miles from the canyon where the dead mare lay when Homan finally captured a big range cow with a calf and a spurting bag.

This one did not run. But she showed fight, and it took fast work on Homan's part to keep his horse from being gored. Finally he had her stretched in the dust, while the calf bawled its fright. Jimmy was following Homan's every move like a reckless pup.

The coil of new rope came into use and, by a series of cowpuncher strategies, Homan got the enraged bovine upon her feet, hind legs tied tight together and her head controlled by his horse and twenty feet of taut lariat.

There ensued a good deal of scrambling, and expostulation, and fancy language, for Jimmy just couldn't understand that he must stoop for his dinner. He persisted in poking his pink nose upward into the cow's flank. He knew that there was milk in the neighborhood, but he couldn't locate it.

Dirk Homan swore earnestly and strove valiantly, but he finally had to give up and get the whiskey flask. He cut a strip from his slicker and wrapped it tightly around the bottle, forming a rude nipple. Then he realized that he had no milk in the bottle. He cut off the nipple and, with Jimmy and the calf as interested spectators, he milked the furious cow, by installments, into the bottle.

Jimmy's first attempt to get nourishment by this novel method was highly unsuccessful. Milk went everywhere but into Jimmy. He got a real swallow from the second bottleful, however, and suddenly comprehended the object of the strange performance. Only by the greatest care and at the expense of several chewed fingers, was Homan able to save the glass from being smashed in the colt's mouth. But presently the small barrel began to bulge comfortably.

"That's all you get," Homan decided at length. "The son of his mother has some rights in this matter, Jimmy."

Homan stood up and looked into the gathering darkness, measuringly. Then a sardonic grin tugged down the corners of his mouth.

"You little scissor-bill!" he growled. "You unprincipled, piebald panhandler, you! You've gypped me outa fifteen thousand dollars. And even if I could make it to Spring Creek, you'd be taggin' along like the tail to a kite. Besides, who'd get your breakfast if I did have the luck to lose you?"

Jimmy wasn't paying any attention. After a pretty strenuous day for an infant, he had curled up and gone fast asleep at Homan's feet.

THE blacksmith at Buck Gulch was contentedly puffing a pipe on the saloon porch in the evening stillness when his idle gaze concentrated on an object moving along the road that led from the south into town.

"Say, whadda you make o' that Cal?" he asked a freighter near him. Cal unfolded his long frame from a cane-bottomed chair and squinted through the dusk. He shifted his quid of tobacco. "Looks mighty like Dirk Homan to me," he answered. "Holy saffron, he's got a nerve!"

"Aw," said the blacksmith, "nothin' stops that guy. If there was a reward for him posted on every telegraph pole, he'd still come ridin' into town chipper as a blackbird."

"He won't be so chipper pretty soon," Cal remarked significantly.

"Mebbe so," the blacksmith admitted laconically. "Mebbe *not* so." He was watching the approaching horseman between narrowed lids. "I can't figger it out," he muttered. "When Homan left Buck Gulch first o' the week, he sure didn't have no colt follerin' him."

"Mebbe he traded horses," Cal suggested. "There's occasions when Homan finds that good policy. Special, you'll notice, when he grows that gosh-awful beard o' his. That's when he nearly always comes ridin' a new horse into town."

The blacksmith nodded. "Yeah, but the horse he's on now is the very same brown gelding he rode away from here. I shod it just 'fore he left. And if that ain't the goldingest lookin' colt I ever laid eyes on in my life! Looks like a bed quilt."

The street was lined with men sitting outside in the warm spring evening. Many and pointed were the remarks made to Dirk Homan as he rode into town with a week-old foal gangling behind his horse. He stopped in front of the saloon and dismounted, to be surrounded by a curious crowd.

They laughed and joked with him, but he sensed a tension beneath their banter and was aware of their veiled glances at each other.

"The foal's mammy fell off a bench in a canyon and busted her neck," he explained casually. "Course, when I fed the little fellow he followed me. Now you hombres just watch how good this baby takes his bottle."

There was an interested silence while the demonstration was made.

Meanwhile U. S. Marshal Rolf had come out of a rooming house up the street. Over the heads of the crowd he saw Homan's horse and heard the owner's voice. The marshal shifted his gun. He had given Homan credit for more sense than to come back to town. Only a fool would have done that. The marshal shouldered his way slowly into the crowd.

"Can you beat it?" Homan was asking, pride in his tone. "Don't the little cuss take it good? He's sure got lots o' savvy. Cal, you been south a good deal. Don't he look to you like part mustang?"

ROLF moved closer, hand resting on the butt of his gun. The marshal stopped, stood stock-still for an instant, his gaze widening, then narrowing as he stared at the scene in the middle of the street.

For a moment no one noticed him. Most of the men were expressing a more or less expert opinion upon the ancestry of the pinto. When that matter had been thrashed out thoroughly, a moment's silence fell.

"Hear about the robbery, Homan?" a man drawled casually.

"Robbery?" the bandit repeated. He stood up, turning a coldly watchful glance on the speaker.

"Yep. D. & P. W. express was held up at the Spring Creek water tank last night."

"The Coucher gang! Beat me to it, blast 'em!" was the thought that flashed through Homan's mind. Aloud he asked, "What did they get?"

"Everything the messenger had in the safe. Where was it you said you run onto this foal?"

Everybody in Buck Gulch believed that Homan had committed the robbery. But no man among them would have been bold enough to ask such a question, with its implication, if he had not been close to the protection of Rolf's famous right hand.

It was at that instant that Homan caught the intent gaze of the marshal fixed upon him. The hand of the bandit flashed back—stopped halfway. To his amazement the officer's left eyelid moved, drooped just a fraction. And Rolf's hands hung harmlessly at his sides.

Homan looked hard at him, not getting it at all. He watched Rolf move forward a couple of steps. The marshal nudged Jimmy with a gentle toe. The small horse, as was his habit after eating, had curled up and gone to sleep. There was no difference to Jimmy between the middle of town and the middle of a mesa.

"Let's step across the street," Marshal Rolf said to Dirk Homan.

The mystified crowd melted away respectfully, while the two men stood in the doorway of an empty building.

"Musta been the Coucher gang, then," said Rolf, thoughtfully whittling a pencil into slivers.

Homan said nothing. He was waiting for a lead.

"Chance is a funny thing," the marshal remarked, eying the little colt asleep in the street. "I guessed pretty close which direction you took out of town the other night. That was chance. And it was chance when I saw a puncher chasing a cow on Cedar Mesa. I supposed he was riding the mare I'd seen with that brown-and-white colt the day before. Could tell the colt, of course, far's I could see him."

Still Homan did not speak. Rolf didn't seem to notice.

"My horse stepped in a dog-hole," the marshal resumed, "and went dead lame on me. I got a fresh one in the morning. From the Spring Creek water tank I followed the tracks of three horses over into the Red Canyon country. Then I lost them. I crossed the tracks of the mare and colt—what I thought was the mare—a long ways south of the mesa. *That* rider couldn't possibly have been in the holdup at the tank."

Homan drew a deep inward sigh of relief. After a meaningful pause, Rolf spoke again.

"Homan, it's my considered opinion that for several years now you've been taking up an undue amount of some people's time," he said significantly. "Why the hell don't you go into another . . . er . . . line of business?"

Dirk Homan stroked his stubbled chin thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right," he admitted. "Might have a try at stock raising. I might even start a horse ranch—with that affidavit of mine out there."

Rolf nodded, his glance following Homan's toward the sleeping Jimmy. Then he walked back to his hotel, a grin on his usually stern face.

Homan stood there for a moment, still rubbing his chin. Then he walked out into the middle of the street and prodded the colt gently with his boot toe.

"You little scissor-bill!" he growled under his breath. "You not only gold-brick me out of a nice haul, but now you're going to make an honest man out of me. Well"—he rubbed his chin—"as a first step toward respectability, I guess I better go get me a shave."

He walked down the street, and Jimmy, getting to his gangly legs with difficulty, trotted after him.

THE END.

LODGE POLES

AMONG the accepted standards of value on the plains were tall, slender pine poles. These were used both by the Indians and by the early-day frontiersmen to make a framework over which hides of buffalo or elk were stretched. Such tepees were far more comfortable than the sod huts or hogans of the desert Indians, and had the advantage of being easily moved by the tribes that followed the migrations of the game herds.

The trees from which these poles came grew in impenetrable forests on the west slopes of the mountains at and above an elevation of eight thousand feet. They were from two inches to four at the base, and from eight to fifteen feet long, or sometimes longer. Even with the crude implements possessed by the Indians, the poles were easily cut and peeled, and when the sap was dried out of them, were light and could be packed in bunches of a dozen or more on each side of a pony.

The west side of North Park, in what is now Colorado, was one of the chief sources of supply, and each year several parties of Indians went there for a supply of the poles. As a result, many skirmishes occurred along the trails leading to the park, and today one may find evidence of these early battles in the arrow points and spearheads scattered among the foothills at the base of the back range.

A dozen seasoned straight lodge poles were accepted as the equal of a prime kit-beaver hide in the territory of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes, and were even more valuable among the Pawnees, Cherokees and tribes farther north. In some instances a good war pony was exchanged for enough poles to build the framework of a single lodge.

HEP THE FEARLESS ONE

by GLENN H. WICHMAN

Hep The Fearless One

MY partner, Hep Gallegher, was greatly given to doing odd and peculiar things, but I'd never seen him do anything quite so foolish as he was doing now. I'd just come around the feed barn and there on foot in the bull pasture behind the barn was Hep.

He and the bull were in the pasture together. Gallegher had a red tablecloth in his hands, and he was waving it at the bull which was a valuable young animal by the name of Sir Percival Out of Lady Butter Churn.

The boss had paid a couple of thousand for Sir Percival up at a stock show and valued him highly, and the orders were that Sir Percival Out of Lady Butter Churn was to be treated only with great respect and consideration. And here Hep was, waving a tablecloth at him and getting him all excited.

"Hep," I yelled, as I ran over to the pasture fence, "come outa there before I take a shot at you! The boss'll skin you alive!"

"What the boss don't know," Hep shouted back, "won't ever give him a headache; Shut up! I'm having me a lesson at matadoring!"

Sir Percival was beginning to show signs of becoming annoyed at having the tablecloth shook in front of him. He was pawing the ground and hunching up and snorting.

"Come on, bull!" yelled Gallegher. "Show a little spunk! Don't be a softy all your life!"

All of a sudden Sir Percival got it through his thick head that he was being insulted. With a mighty bellow he charged right at Hep. Gallegher jumped to one side, holding the tablecloth out in the clear. The bull, having very little sense, never changed direction but charged at the cloth and went by Hep like a train of cars. He even missed the tablecloth and never stopped running until he'd run into the fence at the far end of the pasture.

Hep, looking very proud of himself, folded up the red tablecloth and climbed out of the pasture.

"There you are," he said. "That proves how much smarter and quicker I am than Sir Percival Out of Lady Butter Churn. By dexterous maneuvering and a display of intelligence, I've made a monkey out of the bull. What you've just seen might be called a triumph of mind over bull."

I could tell by looking at him that he wasn't plastered, so I knew it must be that the cogs in his head were slipping more than usual.

"The great trouble with life out here in this cow country," Mr. Gallegher continued, "is that it lacks variety. We learn to rope and ride and shoot and play poker, and that about covers the inventory. I'm goin' to start somethin' different. I'm about to become a steer-dodger. Bein' a kind-hearted gent I'm all agin' the Mexican kind of bull-fightin'. It's too bloodthirsty. But I don't see any reason why I shouldn't learn to get out of a steer's way when it comes chargin' at me."

'Well," I growled, "it'd probably be a relief to the world if you *didn't* get out of the way. But go right ahead. Don't let me stop you."

"I'm going to develop steer-dodging into a high class art," Gallegher declared enthusiastically. "Anybody can jump when something comes rushing at 'em, but there ain't one man in a million who can do it gracefully. I'm sure that the way I do it will be worth goin' a long

ways to look at. The art of it is to linger in the steer's path, holding a red rag until the last possible split-split-second, and then with an effortless movement evaporate to one side. Make the spectators think that you're going to be flattened out like a pancake an' then fool 'em."

"I could think of a lot better ways," said I, "to get some exercise than that."

"That's the trouble with you birds around here!" Hep grumbled. "You've got no imagination—"

IT was a large noise from the direction of the ranchhouse that had interrupted him. We turned around and there came Milt Stiles, the Box F boss. He was waving his arms.

"Trouble's hotfooting it for these parts," I said. "Milt must have got wind of what you've been doin' to his prize bull."

Which, we learned, was exactly what had happened. The cook had told him.

"You're fired!" Milt roared at Hep. "You're fired! By thunder, I never heard of such a numbskull! Tormenting Sir Percival! Such a bonehead!"

Then he turned on me. "George," he yelled, "you're fired too! You're a friend of Gallegher's, so you must be as crazy as he is! You let him do it!"

As usual, Gallegher could think of something to say.

"Milt," he began, "it's a pity that you don't know somethin' about the beauties of bullfightin'. I'll bet you don't even know what a matador is."

Having relieved his mind by firing us, Milt now calmed down enough to talk without yelling. "I don't," he admitted. "An' I don't wanta know, either!"

"Such ignorance!" sighed Hep. "And I'll bet you don't even know what a banderillero is?"

The boss began to get mad all over. "Speak English," he shouted, "if you want me to listen to you!"

Gallegher tried to look sarcastic. "Tush, Milt," he said, "you oughta feel cheap. Your ignorance is vaster than a sheep-herder's. Why, I'll bet you don't even know what a picador is!"

"I'll *picador* you!" shouted Milt Stiles. "Five minutes I'll give the both of you to get off this spread or I'll start shootin'!" And with that he turned around and stalked back for the ranchhouse.

But Gallegher was going to educate him about bullfighting if he had to burst his lungs doing it. "A matador," shouted Hep, "is a bullfighter with a sword! A picador is a horse when he fights a bull! A banderillero—"

But by now Milt Stiles had plugged his ears up with his thumbs so Gallegher gave up.

"Now you've done it," I said. "Here we had a good job an' you up an' spoil it by shakin' a red tablecloth at Sir Percival Out of Lady Butter Churn."

"What does that matter!" replied Gallegher disdainfully. "I'm on my way up to better things and you're welcome to come along. I'm going to put on my steer-dodgin' act at rodeos. I'll make more money than Milt Stiles'll ever make with his Box F!"

This didn't sound so good but apparently we were in for whatever it was we were in for. Gallegher was off again and only a steer could stop him.

"Listen," said I, as we started up toward the bunkhouse, "I'll bet a dollar it wasn't you that thought of

this. You've been listening to somebody."

"Correct," admitted Gallegher. "Of course. A man learns by listening. It was Manuel Caballero, the Mex bartender at the Pitchfork Saloon who was tellin' me about bullfightin'. He said he thought I'd make a good one because I'm fast on my feet and I've got a mind that works like greased lightnin'. Caballero wants to sorta manage me. He used to be a bullfighter before he got too fat to move."

"It's too bad," said I, "that a flock of bulls didn't run over Mr. Caballero when he was a boy."

"I'm going to call myself," Hep continued, as if he didn't hear what I said, "Señor Gallegher the Fearless One. That'll sound good and look swell on the rodeo advertisements. Señor Gallegher the Fearless One!" His chest swole up so much that a button popped off.

"You look about as much like a Mexican bullfighter," I told him, "as you do a Chinese laundryman. But come on. Our five minutes is about up an' we don't want the boss to shoot us."

So me and Gallegher gathered up our worldly belongings, drew our pay, said good-by to the Box F and rode into the town of Pecosville. After we'd got settled in the rooming house we ambled over to the Pitchfork Saloon.

THE good Señor Manuel Caballero was behind the bar. Manuel wasn't much of a Mexican. He'd been born somewhere up in Colorado and didn't even speak the language except in isolated spots. About all he knew was "*si, señor*" and "*pronto*" and "*quién sabe,*" and a few other odds and ends of south of the border lingo.

"Ah!" exclaimed Caballero, as we came up to the bar. "Señor Hep Gallegher the Fearless One! Welcome, gents! Have a snort."

"A few snifters would help quite a lot," I said. "It'll soften the pain. Manuel, exactly when was it that you were a bullfighter?"

"Who said I was a bullfighter?" Caballero demanded, as he filled the glasses.

"You did!" Hep insisted.

Manuel Caballero patted his fat stomach and shook his head. "I never said anything of the kind. *Quién sabe!* What I said was that I knew all about bull-fighting. I read a book on it. If I can ever get my waist measurement down under six feet I'm goin' to become one. In the meantime I'm goin' to make Gallegher into one."

This seemed to satisfy Hep. "Well," he admitted, "reading a book about bullfighting and being a bullfighter amounts to practically one and the same thing. Proceed with everything, Señor Caballero. What do I do next?"

"We'll have a couple more fingers of tonic," the bartender said, "an' then get down to business."

Between the three of us we put quite a dent in the bottle.

"I've come to a conclusion," Manuel Caballero finally got around to inform us. "I've considered everything and here's the way the land lays: Señores, there's no rodeo due to be held in these parts for six weeks or more. But that's no reason why we should be idle and not make some money in the meantime. Gallegher, we've got to expand and enlarge. It wouldn't do for you to be the only bullfighter around here. In order to make it interesting you must develop some competition for yourself. *Pronto!* In other words there must be more bullfighters here

than just you. Do you follow me, gents?"

"Not noticeably," said I.

"I follow you perfectly," Hep declared.

"That's the spirit!" Caballero exclaimed. "Gallegher, what you an' me are goin' to do is to start a school for bullfighters. Quite a few of the young bucks here in town will want to take lessons. We'll charge 'em five dollars a lesson."

"Bravo!" Hep shouted, getting himself into the bullfighting spirit. "Manuel, it's a pleasure to be associated with such a brainy bird as you are!"

"Spoken like a matador!" said Caballero.

"Spoken like a damn fool," said I. "It'll be a wonder if both you gents don't end up by bein' locked in the nut house."

"What a shame, George," Gallegher remarked, "that you ain't got the imagination that me and Señor Caballero have. We're goin' some place in the world an' you'll end up a forty-a-month bush-popper!"

"Again I gotta compliment you, Hep," the bartender put in. "That was spoken just like a true banderillero!"

"What," I asked, "are you buzzards going to use for a bull? Neither one of you, or both of you together could buy as much as half a bull."

This had Gallegher behind the eight ball. "We might borrow one," he suggested. "Or if we wouldn't get hung for it, we might steal one."

"If the worst comes to the worst, Gallegher," Manuel said, "I'll let you run off with somebody's bull. But in the meantime, I've got a better suggestion than that." He jerked his fat thumb at me. "In the meantime," he continued, "we'll use a human bull. We'll let George here be the bull!"

Even Hep looked astonished at such brilliance. "Of course!" he exclaimed. "George'll make a good bull. He can run fast."

"Gents," I announced, "I will *not* be a bull! And the next one of you who suggests it gets hit on the head with a cuspidor!"

The good señor looked horrified. "I wouldn't for anything," said he, "have Gallegher hit on the head with a cuspidor. As usual, I've got the answer. We'll let our pupils take turns at being the bull. They can take turns at being both the matador and the bull."

Gallegher blinked. "It's wonderful, señor," he applauded, "what you can think of."

"You haven't seen anything yet," said the bartender. "You wait until I get warmed up and then I'll really do some thinking."

About this time Tabor Smith, who owned the Pitchfork Saloon, came in to take his turn at dishing out the refreshments.

"I'm off duty now for the balance of the afternoon and evening," Caballero announced. "Come on! We'll get the bullfightin' school started."

Me and Gallegher followed him out the rear door and into a small shack in the back yard which was where he lived.

"Hep," said Manuel, "the first thing it to make you look like a Spanish bullfighter. Kindly take off your Levis and slip on this pair of Mexican britches."

"They look too small," Gallegher objected.

"We'll get you into 'em," Caballero insisted, "even if we have to use a shoehorn."

THE both of us went to work on Hep. By doin' a lot of shoving and pushing and cussing, we managed to get him into the bell-bottom Mexican pants. They fitted him much tighter than his skin had ever fitted.

"Perfect!" Manuel exclaimed. "If you weren't so bowlegged, Gallegher, you'd have Mexican gals hovering around you by the thousands."

"It's a pity, Hep," said I, "that your legs look so much like the sides of a harp. Or mebbe it's a good thing."

"My legs are goin' to sleep," Gallegher complained. "There ain't any blood circulatin'."

"Never mind your circulation," said Caballero. "You'll get used to not havin' any. But you want to be careful not to sit down. If you do your pants'll bust as sure as anything. *Caramba!* I never saw such a tight fit in my life."

Then Manuel took off Hep's Stetson and in its place put on a sombrero that was about three feet across. The bartender had no serape, but he did have a faded cotton comforter which he draped rakishly over Gallegher's shoulders.

"There you are!" Caballero shouted. "You're the complete picture of a bullfighter!"

"He looks to me," said I, "like a combination of an Indian chief and a lunatic." I had been getting more and more suspicious about this thing. "Manuel," I asked, "what have you got up your sleeve? Come clean, you louse! What is it that you're lettin' Hep in for? There's dirty work bein' cooked up here an' you know it!"

Señor Caballero looked as sad as an old cow. "Such ingratitude," he murmured. "All I'm trying to do is make me and Gallegher some honest dollars. Life here in Pecosville has been dull for a long time. There're young men here in town who are just itchin' to find something to do that'll impress their best girls. They've tried everything and with no luck. Women just naturally like brave bullfighters—"

"Sure they do," Hep chimed in. "Listen, George, if you don't stop bein' disagreeable we'll hogtie yuh an' put yuh under the bed!"

It wasn't any use. I gave up.

"We'll now go out in the street," said Manuel, "and corral some students."

He led the way up beside the Pitchfork Saloon and onto the plank walk. He thought it'd be a good idea to interview Luke Brett, the storekeeper, as a prospect, so we ambled down the street.

Luke was behind the counter. He was a long, tall bald-headed gent and lately had been having romantic ideas. The object of his affections was Tillie Peterson, the auburn-haired gal who ran the Pecosville Quick Lunch. But Brett had plenty of competition because young Charley Buffington, the banker, wanted to marry Tillie as well as quite a few other gents, including Deputy Sheriff Jim Harris. And I wasn't so sure likewise, but that Señor Manuel Caballero had ideas of marrying Miss Tillie himself.

Luke Brett's eyes opened in wonderment at sight of Hep. He was kinda near-sighted. "No Indians are wanted here," he announced. "Git out! Vamose!"

"This is no Indian," said Caballero. "It's a bullfighter. It's Hep Gallegher the Fearless One."

"One what?" demanded Luke.

"One bullfihter," said Caballero.

"Luke," Gallegher put in, "you oughta learn something about the art of bullfighting. You'll never

make any impression on Tillie Peterson by slicin' cheese and sackin' potatoes. You wanta become romantic. Do somethin' that'll make her blood run hot an' cold by turns. That's the way to a gal's heart. Show her that you ain't afraid to risk breakin' your neck for her amusement, but that you're too durn smart to get it busted."

"Savvy?" Caballero asked suddenly.

Luke Brett blushed like a bride. "By gosh!" he exclaimed. "There may be somethin' in what you say. Miss Tillie's mind been wanderin' lately when I'm around her and I've run out of things to talk about."

"Look at me," Gallegher reminded him. "Yesterday I was an ordinary dogie chaser. Today I'm a bullfighter. If you was like me, Luke, you'd have somethin' to talk about."

"Would I have to wear a comforter around like Gallegher does?" Luke asked hesitantly.

"You wouldn't," Hep assured him. "I'm dressed up like a Spanish matador. There's no reason why you shouldn't be an American-style matador."

"Remarkable," Señor Caballero beamed. "Gallegher, I hadn't thought of that. It simplifies matters. Thanks for remindin' me of it. We'll have two styles of bullfightin' in our school. Spanish and American."

"I'll take the American," Luke decided.

"Five dollars," said Hep.

Luke Brett, who up to then had always thought intelligent, passed over the money.

"The class will take up this evening an hour before sundown," explained the bartender. "Our place of meeting will be the sycamore grove north of town."

Me and Hep the Fearless One and Señor Caballero hurried out of the store before Luke Brett could change his mind and want his money back. Somebody spotted Hep's strange costume and set up a holler.

"Help! Murder!" the man yelled. "Gallegher's gone crazy! Get the horse doctor!"

"Be brave, Hep," Caballero urged. "You've got nothin' to fear with me an' George to guard you. Now we'll go an' see the banker."

BEFORE much of a crowd could gather we were inside the bank. Charley Buffington, the banker, was a serious sort of bird and as dignified as a couple of parsons.

Young Buffington looked balefully at Hep over the top of his glasses. "This bank," he said severely, "is hardly the place to cut up monkeyshines in."

"You're lookin' at a bullfighter," Gallegher told him, "and not at a monkey. It's a good thing for you, my fine-feathered young friend, that I'm a patient man." Then he reeled off the same speech that he'd given Luke Brett, the storekeeper, and while he was doing it folks gaped in through the door and windows.

"Bullfighter!" Charley Buffington exclaimed. "I can hardly believe it."

"It's the coming sport of the West," Hep answered. "Seeing that you're an up-and-coming young gent, you oughta get in on the ground floor. Be brave, Mr. Buffington, and become a bullfighter. Tillie Peterson is especially interested in men who aren't afraid to try something different."

"Tillie Peterson," the banker repeated and got red around the ears.

That settled it. Although Charley Buffington admitted that he must be getting soft in the head, he forked

over five dollars and said he'd be down at the sycamores for his lesson.

We had to force our way through the crowd to get out of the bank.

"Make way for the noble bullfighter!" Manuel Caballero kept shouting.

"Bullfighter!" a loud voice exclaimed. "I thought Hep was sellin' hot tamales!"

"Watch out for his pants!" a young lad hollered. "They're about to bust!"

No more had we got out on the plank walk than Deputy Sheriff Jim Harris came hustling down the street. Jim was in a large state of excitement.

"What," he demanded, "is the meanin' of this riot? Break away in the name o' the law!"

"We're watchin' Mr. Gallegher's pants!" the lad explained.

"Well! Well!" the deputy said, as he cooled down. "I thought from the looks of things that Judge Lynch was gettin' ready to ride. But apparently it's just a case of advanced imbecility."

"Nothin' of the kind," the bartender objected. "It's a bullfighter that you're lookin' at."

Gallegher drew the deputy to one side and explained the situation. He offered to take the deputy on as a pupil.

"Tillie Peterson," Jim Harris mused. "By thunder, if that's the way it lays, I don't wanta be left out of it! Here's my five dollars."

"What a pleasure," beamed Señor Caballero, "to have the law and statutes on our side of the fence. Harris, I wish you'd disperse this crowd. They make Gallegher nervous."

So Jim Harris chased everybody away who'd go without a fight. We proceeded down the street in quest of students and came to the Pecosville Quick Lunch. Tillie Peterson stood in the doorway, and a very pretty sight she made with the sunlight playing in her auburn hair. No wonder all the unmarried gents around and about wanted to marry her. Not only was she a great pleasure to look at but she was an excellent cook and turned out biscuits that were as light as feathers.

"Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Gallegher, what's happened to you?"

Hep drew the faded comforter up around him and explained. For some reason Señor Caballero appeared abashed at sight of the gal and hovered in the background as though he didn't even know us. He never as much as opened his mouth once.

"Ma'am," Hep concluded, "I'm sure you'd be interested in watchin' the lesson that I'm goin' to give down in the sycamores. My pupils, which include Charley Buffington and Luke Brett and Jim Harris, will be sure flattered if you'll watch 'em."

Miss Tillie's laughter was like the rustling of tree leaves on a spring day. "Nothing would give me more pleasure," she said. "I'll leave the beanery in charge of the waiter an' come down. So Luke Brett is going to become a bullfighter." The thought must have done something to her because she blushed.

The lady restaurant-keeper then went back into her hash house and we proceeded with the recruiting. Three more disciples of bullfighting we gathered in at five dollars per head. One was old Whisky Tucker, who swamped at the Pitchfolk. The second was the saddlemaker, Gus Miller. And the third was Will Durham who hostled for the stagecoach line.

"Thirty dollars," said Hep and

Señor Caballero in unison. "Not so bad."

"It'd be much better," said I, "if Manuel was back tendin' bar an' you an' me was worryin' the Box F dogies. No good'll come of anything as senseless as this. It couldn't!"

They wouldn't talk to me any more, seein' that they'd become so prosperous. About this time Gallegher developed a violent appetite. While curious citizens followed us we went down to the restaurant. Here a minor difficulty developed. Hep couldn't sit down.

So Gallegher leaned up in the corner as straight as a fence post and held his plate with one hand while he shoveled in the beans with the other. After eating we borrowed a red tablecloth and went out for some more recruits, but nobody else'd join.

THE afternoon wore on. By now nearly everybody in town had heard about the bullfighting school. Five o'clock and a crowd began gathering under the sycamores. By the time the three of us got there all of eighty people were scattered about, including the six pupils. Tillie Peterson arrived just as we did.

"Howdy, ma'am," Señor Caballero said to her. "May I have the pleasure, ma'am, of standin' with you and watchin' the bullfightin'?"

"Well," Tillie answeerd, "I guess I don't mind. Come ahead."

"Now look here, Caballero," Hep objected, "I thought you was goin' to help me run this?"

The bartender tried to look innocent. "Why, nothing of the kind," he said. "I've told you all about it. Now you go ahead and do it. You're the head bullfighter, not me."

"Shucks!" Gallegher grunted.

"You asked for it," I told him. "Hep the Fearless One. Go on an' prove it."

Me and the bartender and Tillie Peterson went and stood under a tree.

"George," said Manuel to me, "I'm sure there's somebody around here wants to see you worse'n me an' Tillie do. Go chase yourself!"

But the kind-hearted restaurant gal came to my defense. "George," she said, "you stay right where you are. Mr. Caballero hasn't any monopoly on my company."

This, I could see, didn't please Manuel any too well.

There was some confusion at first but finally Hep got his six pupils lined up in front of him. Of the six Whiskey Tucker, who never knew for sure whether he was afoot or on horseback, was at ease. The rest of 'em fidgeted like colts and sent sly glances at Tillie Peterson. All five of 'em apparently had hopes of impressing the gal so much that she'd want to marry 'em.

Charley Buffington, the banker, was blushing and looking as serious as though he was figuring up compound interest. Luke Brett, the lanky storekeeper, was blushing and looking foolish. Deputy Sheriff Jim Harris appeared slightly bewildered but he was a studious nature and wanted to learn something about everything. The saddlemaker and the hostler glowered at people in the audience who were laughing at them.

"Fellow bullfighters," Gallegher began, "you're here to have a lesson in bullfighting. The art of bullfighting is as follows: When you shake the red cloth at the bull and he rushes straight at you, you must fool him by, at the last possible second, stepping to one side. You must do it gracefully and with ease, sort of like a dancing master. Whoever does it most gracefully will win the

prize. Only brave men make good bullfighters because some bulls are cross-eyed and you can't be sure which way they'll run. Is this all clear?"

"Listen, Hep," said Whiskey Tucker, "I thought this was goin' to be a barbecue. I thought we were goin' to eat a bull. I quit!" He went over and sat on a stump. Hep had lost one of his pupils.

For the first time I noticed that Señor Caballero was standing very close to Miss Tillie and speaking into her beautiful ear. I eased up closer.

"Ma'am," Manuel whispered, "did you ever in your life see grown men act so silly?"

"Shush," said Tillie. "They might hear you."

"Scholars," Gallegher continued, "in our first lesson we won't use a live bull. It'd be far too dangerous. One of you'll take the part of the bull. The rest of you'll be matadors. Who'll volunteer to be the bull?"

Nobody volunteered. All the pupils glowered at one another suspiciously and it was pretty evident that none of them thought very much of each other and wouldn't trust one another farther than you could throw a piano.

"Come, come," Hep pleaded. "Who'll be the bull?"

"Let's hold an election," Charley Buffington suggested. "I nominate Luke Brett for the bull."

"Second the motion," said Deputy Jim Harris. "Everybody in favor—"

Everybody yelled "Aye" except Luke. He yelled "No."

"It's unanimous," Gallegher declared. "Luke, you're the bull."

Señor Caballero was laughing softly. "Tillie," he said, "I hope you're noticing what numskulls these friends of yours are. Imagine fellas of their age actin' like this."

"Poor Luke," Tillie said unhappily. "Poor, poor Luke."

"Poor, my eye," Manuel snapped. "He's an idiot!"

"You keep quiet," said Tillie.

By now Hep had got things somewhat organized. He tore the tablecloth into pieces and gave a piece to each of the matadors. "The matadors will now line up," Gallegher ordered, "and Luke, lowering his head like a bull, will charge at us one at a time."

"Heavens to Betsy," the storekeeper moaned. "I never thought I'd come to this."

Nevertheless, he doubled himself up, and with his head down rushed at Deputy Sheriff Jim Harris who was waving his piece of red tablecloth. Harris wasn't very fast on his feet, and Luke Brett didn't steer exactly a straight course, not being able to see where he was going. The result—Brett's head rammed the deputy in the stomach.

"Ouch!" Harris gasped, as all the wind went out of him. He sat down fast.

Everybody laughed but Harris. He got mad, jumped to his feet, held his stomach with one hand and took a swing at Luke Brett with the other. But he missed Luke and hit the banker, Charley Buffington, on the ear. It looked like the makings of a riot.

Señor Caballero was easing up closer to Tillie and his voice was as soft as silk. "You see, ma'am," he said, "what ninnies these birds are who want to marry you. I'm the only one here who's got enough dignity to be a husband. Tillie, you'll make a great mistake if you don't marry me. Just look at these overgrown flatheads actin' like children!"

Miss Tillie turned on the bartender. "You viper!" she cried. "It was you that started this!"

"Now just be calm, ma'am," Manuel urged hastily. "Sure I did. An' I did it so's to prove to you that these suitors of yours are empty-headed fools an' that you oughta marry me—"

He never got any further because at that precise instant Tillie Peterson hit him on his face with the flat of her hand. Then it was that things really got started with a bang. Luke Brett had charged again! This time he hit Charley Buffington, glanced off him and rammed his head smack into a tree. This like to caved Luke's bald head in. He started staggering around as if he couldn't stop.

In the excitement Gallegher tripped over something and fell down. This was too much for his Mexican pants. They burst in forty places simultaneously. He popped out of them like a pea out of a pod. About all he had left on was his red flannels. Just as I was thinking, it was lucky a real bull wasn't around, a whole lot of other things happened at once. When the spectators saw Tillie slap the bartender they thought he'd insulted her, so they took out after him to avenge the insult.

"Luke!" screamed Tillie. "Luke, dear!"

"My pants!" yelled Hep.

"Everybody's under arrest!" the deputy shouted. "I've had enough! This is war!"

It was worse than a stampede. Folks shouted and hollered and ran. In the confusion I fell over and somebody kicked me in the head. It was an awful sock. The lights went out. When I came around again twilight had come and me and Gallegher were the only occupants of the sycamore grove. Hep was wrapped up in the comforter and looked very sad indeed.

"Shucks!" Gallegher moaned. "I've been made a sucker of for the last time. Damn that bartender! He took me to the laundry. Tillie saved him from the mob, but they chased him out of town anyway. I'll bet he's runnin' yet."

"The suitors?" I asked.

"Well," continued Hep, "Tillie felt so sorry for Luke because he had to be the bull and bumped his head, that she said 'yes' to a question he'd once asked her. They're gettin' married. The last I saw of Buffington and Harris and the other two suitors they were so mad they were takin' swings at each other. Shucks! I'm never goin' to be a sucker again."

"Hep the fearless," I said scornfully. "Hep the great bullfighter. Hep the pantless! You oughta be ashamed of yourself."

"I am," Gallegher said sadly, but I knew I couldn't count on his staying that way.

THE END.

The Story of the West

Told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

THE life of the early trapper and trader was filled with risks, hazards and hardships, and the financial returns were in most cases extremely small. But the wild, free and adventurous life drew many brave spirits from the more mundane life behind the plow.

Most of them outfitted at St. Louis with traps, packs of articles for trade, provisions and ammunition, and joined the many who made their way up the swirling current of the Missouri, bound for the land of the deer and the antelope, the dangerous grizzly, the buffalo and the redskin.

The trapper-trader usually set out on his expedition during the early part of the summer since it sometimes took months to reach his destination. Arriving on "location" with some tribe in the late summer or autumn, he trapped and traded through the winter, returning downstream by canoe, boat or raft in the spring with his load of furs.

Often a sunken log or "sawyer" caused the wreck of his craft and the entire loss of his winter's furs or again he was robbed of them by some hostile tribe through whose country he passed. It was no life for the weakling nor the timid. The early traders were a courageous and competent breed, able alike to handle a paddle, an unbroken Indian pony or to follow their lengthy trap lines for weary miles on snow shoes in the deep snows of winter. Explorers they were, too, in many cases being the first white men to open new territory.

The general custom of a trader-trapper, starting out from St. Louis or some other point, was to proceed by river and forest, by plain and mountain pass to the vicinity of some particular tribe of Indians. The first meeting with these Indians was always a critical moment until the trader learned whether they would prove friendly.

If friendly overtures were exchanged, a powwow or impromptu council was held. It was the custom for the trader to request permission of the chief to trap in his country and to trade for furs with his people. If permission was granted, the trader established a main camp near or with the tribe where his trading operations were conducted. Then, after scouting out the adjacent country for the best localities, he set out his circuit of traps. The extent of his circuit varied anywhere from fifteen or twenty miles to one hundred, depending on the abundance of the fur-bearing animals, the character of the country and the ambition and energy of the trapper. Smaller camps were built along the circuit and with the coming of the long winter, the trapper donned snow shoes and began the weary round of his line.

It is recorded that on one occasion a trader applied to a despotic chief of the "Mahas" (presumably the Omahas) for permission to trade with his tribe. The chief ordered the trader to lay out all his goods in his lodge with all packages opened. The trader did so and the chief picked out about a quarter of the entire stock of goods for his own, including the finest and most valuable articles in the trader's pack.

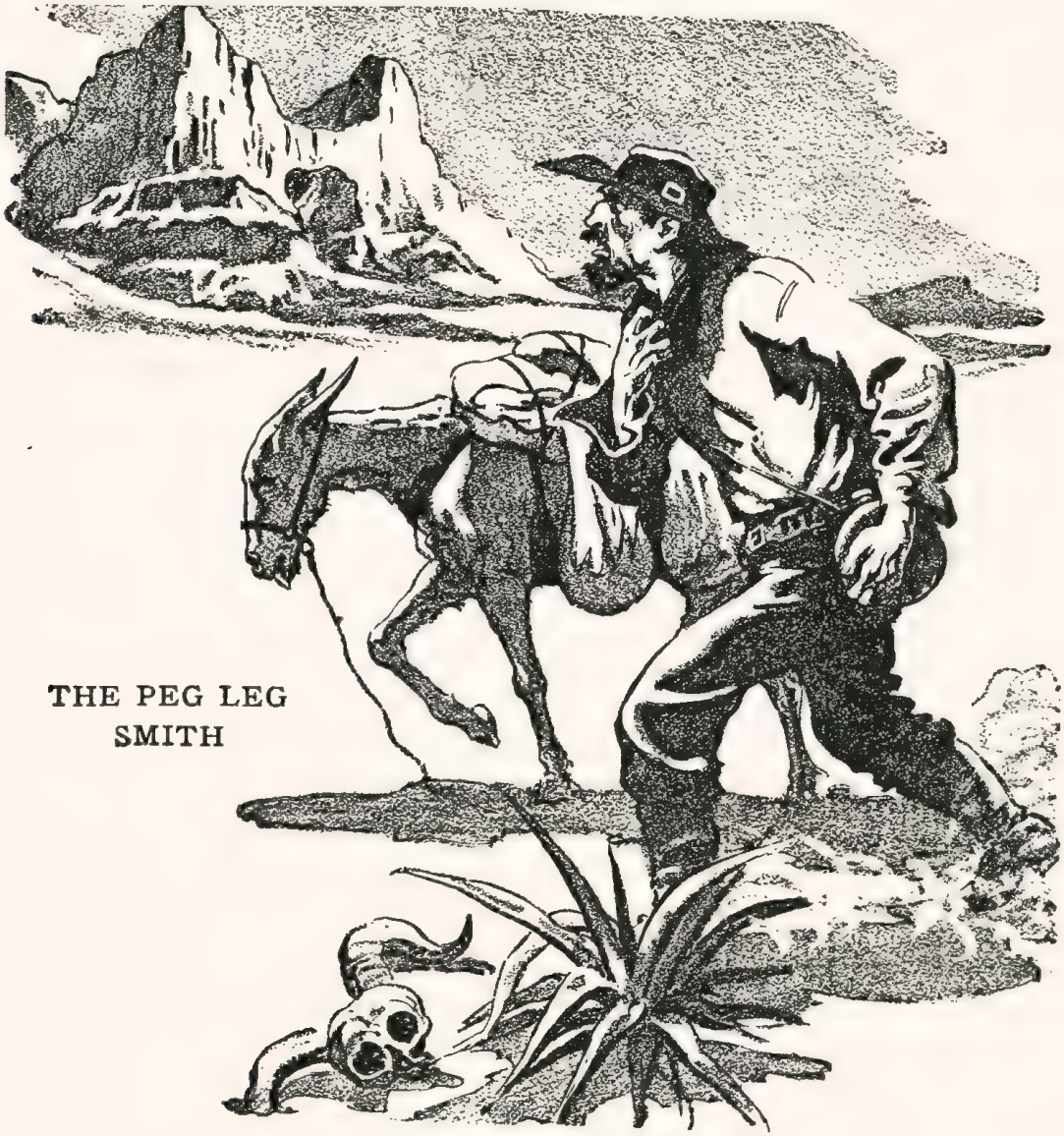
When the chief finished his private business with the trader he called his herald, and through the latter ordered his people to bring their furs for trade and in no case to dispute the terms of the trader. The deal, of course, was most profitable for the white man, although he had already disposed of his best goods.

This particular chief was called by the French "Oiseau noir" (Black Bird) and it was claimed that he was able to wield such great power over his tribe by poisoning any who opposed him with arsenic, of which he had, at one time, received a great quantity from some trader. How long he was able to maintain his tyrannical rule is not known.

NEXT WEEK: PIONEER WOMEN

It was the custom of the trader to request permission of the chief of a tribe to trap in his country and to trade for furs with his people.

Famous Lost Mines



THE PEG LEG SMITH

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

IT is a long time since Peg Leg Smith first described the place where he found his gold. Barring the load of yellow-flaked black rocks that the old trapper, Indian trader, scout and prospector brought out of the desert with him, the treasure is still there. Its rediscovery will make any man rich for life.

The desert is much the same today as it was in Smith's time. Mountains don't vanish into thin air. And the landmarks to Peg Leg's mine are certainly explicit. Particularly the pair of twin black buttes connected by a low saddle, and rising perhaps a thousand to twelve hundred feet above the level of the burning, sun-parched desert floor. From the top

of these buttes which Peg Leg climbed to get his bearings he could clearly see a high, towering mountain off to the northwest—Smith Mountain.

All right, let's get down to cases. Who was Smith? Did he really exist? Where was he coming from and where was he heading for on the fateful trip across the southern California sand on which he lost himself and found more golden riches than any prospector ever dreamed of?

Smith was real enough. He was a contemporary of some of the greatest frontiersmen this country ever knew, men like Kit Carson and Jim Bridger. There are, or were until recently, old-time miners and prospectors in California who remembered when he died in San Diego. In those later days he had become a stagecoach driver and the peg leg which gave him his nickname was then in evidence.

Of course some men scoffed at his tale. There are always doubters. But most of those who knew Peg Leg believed him. Besides it was pretty hard to explain away the gold he brought back with him and other corroborative evidence which cropped up later.

At any rate, shortly after gold had been found in Sutter's millrace at Coloma and the stampede to the new diggings was on, Smith set out from Yuma to cross the desert afoot to Los Angeles. He took with him a single pack animal, a mule. Though he had never made that particular journey before, the trip of several hundred miles across an arid waste meant little to him. He was used to traveling the uncharted country of the pioneer Southwest. And he was not the kind to get panicky over any mishap on the trail.

That is why when, a few days out from Yuma—he never was sure just how many—he missed an important waterhole and realized definitely he was lost, he didn't get excited. Instead of desperately beating back and forth across the desert floor in search of water, he sought the highest landmark he could find. He knew that from it he would get a much broader view of the surrounding terrain and thus a better chance to locate his position in the sun-tortured wilderness of sand and sage.

Taking his pack animal with him he scaled one of the black buttes. From its crest he saw the high mountain off to the northwest and reasoned that probably he could find water at its base. He started down the butte, descending on the side that faced the mountain. Suddenly as he threaded his way down the winding declivity of a narrow, gravel-floored dry canyon bed he stopped. Stooping over, he picked up one of the glittering pebbles that had caught his eye. It was a stone of black or smoky quartz shot through with flakes of gold, the gleaming yellow metal embedded in the velvet sheen of rock.

Searching for water, he had found gold. Astounded at his unexpected discovery he paused and stared about him. The canyon floor was littered with the black stones carrying free gold. Some of the pebbles were small like those he had already picked up. Others were larger, quite sizable chunks weighing several pounds apiece. More wealth than he had ever imagined lay at his feet, his for the taking.

Yet all the gold in the world wasn't half so important to Peg Leg Smith just then as a simple drop of water. Fate had played a scurvy trick on the hard-bitten old pioneer.

He needed water and had found a well of gold.

THE gods must have chuckled at their grim little joke that day as they looked down and watched the thirst-weakened prospector methodically discard his gear and load his duffel bag, freshly filled with the golden stones, onto the sagging back of his weary pack animal. Then he picked his way down the cut in the steep side of the butte. Eventually he came out onto the floor of a long valley which he followed until it opened into another larger and much wider valley at almost right angles to the one that lead from the butte. Across this wider valley lay the mountain he had seen, and Peg Leg headed for it.

He found no water at its base, was too weak to attempt climbing it and so staggered on for days. He traveled in what he thought was the general direction of the Pacific coast, skirting the desert for a pass through the mountains. When at last he reached civilization, he had no idea how long he had been gone, and the story of his gold gurgled crazily from his cracked, thirst-blackened lips. He was water-weak, half delirious, his eyes swollen and bloodshot. But he pointed to the sack of golden rocks on his gaunt, rib-latticed mule.

Crazy or not, there was no gainsaying the several thousand dollars' worth of gold in that sack. And when he got on his feet again, Peg Leg spent it. He also talked freely. There was enough for everybody, he declared expansively to his friends. And when he told them where to go to get it, they went. But they came back empty-handed.

Smith had run a whizzer on them, they claimed. He hadn't given them the right directions. "Very well," said Smith—he was up in Mojave then. "Effen yo're so dad-gasted dumb an' kain't folly desert directions, I'll take you to them black buttes meself. Git yore possibles packed and tail along."

About to run out of funds himself, Smith had decided on another visit to his great bonanza. The only condition he exacted of those who were invited to go along with him was that they pay him a small share, a royalty as it were, on the amount of the gold they picked up. The little cavalcade of jubilant miners and prospectors set out across the desert. They were well supplied with water casks, food, tools, and extra pack animals to bring back the gold.

AFTER they had been gone a few days, Smith, in the lead of the party, began to hesitate, to waver over decisions as to which direction to take. He wandered in snake tracks all over the desert. But those black buttes connected by a low saddle seemed to have disappeared. It was as if the desert had swallowed them up. Smith's followers grew restive and accused the old man of leading them on a wild-goose chase. Just why he should have, they never attempted to explain. Certainly Smith stood to gain nothing by taking a group of men on an aimless parade across the desert.

Finally Peg Leg gave up and the disconsolate, disgusted and trail-weary party returned. And human nature being what it is, it was then that the loud cries of "Fake" began to be raised about Smith and his fabulous or more likely mythical, twin black buttes.

Nevertheless, the search went on. There were always some who thought Peg Leg was on the level

Continued on page 129

ACES COME HIGH

by JACKSON GREGORY

Part Two

Aces Come High

The Story So Far:

ROSS HAVERIL'S unexpected appearance in Black Jack Devlin's Mountain House, a famous gambling place, is a signal for trouble since the first man he meets is Tom Storm who had once robbed him in South America. The two, to the mystification of the spectators, plunge into a fierce fight which is ended abruptly when Devlin hits Haveril on the head with a blackjack and has him thrown out. A friend of Haveril's, Bob Roberts, who is also at odds with Storm, take up the fight. Again Black Jack interferes, this time knocking Storm out. Roberts takes Haveril to the latter's home in Secret Valley which, Haveril is amazed to learn, has, during his twelve-year absence, passed into the hands of Luke Oliver, a trusted employee.

Later that night, Don Rodriguez Valdez y Munoz, owner of Paradise Valley which adjoins Secret Valley, comes to see Haveril. He is anxious to learn the reason for Haveril's enmity toward Tom Storm and intimates that he would like to see Storm killed.

CHAPTER VII

HIDDEN FORTUNE

WHEN Bob Roberts and Luke Oliver returned to the house they found Ross Haveril striding up and down, his hands deep in his pockets, a thoughtful scowl dragging his brows down. At first he didn't notice them. Then suddenly he swung about.

"How come, Luke? You own my valley, don't you?" he demanded. "Let's have the story. And before you shift your cud and start, let me tell you something: Secret Valley is Haveril Valley, and it's going to be that way!"

"I'd be relieved," said Luke, and shifted his cud. And then, having marked the look on young Haveril's face and having taken stock of the tone of his voice, he said, "All right, I'll tell you the tale of woe. You'll remember you went away one time. You was no more than a kid. I looked all over the ranch for you next day and couldn't find you. That was the day after your mother died."

He stopped and took a deep breath. When Ross' mother had died, all those years ago, Luke had wished he was dead, too. But no one on earth, except Luke Oliver, had ever guessed that. Luke kept staring at Ross now, and his nostrils, beginning to redden around the edges, flared like a horse's. Ross was silent.

"All right," resumed Luke. "You upped and run away and I ain't seen you from that day to this. Nor your dad didn't see you either, or hear from you or know where in hell you'd went to. Well, him and me kept things going, but they kept going downhill. He went broke, good and plenty. Me, I'd saved my wages all my life. I kicked in with my wad, hoping to save Secret Valley. Your dad died, and I sort of reckon he was glad to. He'd been pretty damn lonesome. There was a will, and he passed Secret Valley along to me, instead of to you. And if there's anything else you want to know, you just ask and I'll tell you."

"Why, damn you, Luke!" said Ross Haveril, and shot his hand out to grasp Luke's, nearly wringing it free of his wrist. "Why, damn you, Luke Oliver!"

"All right, all right," said Luke petulantly. "Now what? If you want your lousy old ranch back, go get me a piece of paper and a pen and ink and I'll give it to you. It ain't worth the powder to blow it to hell. And besides, it's mortgaged clean to the hilt to a guy named Tom Storm, and I heard tell you know him."

"Tom Storm, again, eh? How much is the mortgage, Luke?"

"I borrowed five thousand. I couldn't even pay interest. I borrowed another thousand. That made it six and— Oh, hell, Ross, I ain't a mathematician. I'd say, offhand, about seven thousand, maybe eight."

"All right," cried Ross. "Whatever the mortgage is, I'll pay it. And I'll give you the same amount in cash to buy Secret Valley back from you. And you can add onto that any damn amount you please, and I'll pay it too! Is it a deal?"

"You?" Luke said incredulously. "You? Don't make me laugh. It's getting late for me. Let's have a drink and go to bed. In the morning when you're sober, we'll talk."

"Come here, Luke," grinned Ross Haveril, "and help me pull my shirt tail out!"

BUT without help he yanked his shirt up himself. There was a broad money belt about his middle—and both Bob Roberts and Luke Oliver noticed that Ross Haveril's waist was lean and hard like a good fighting man's. Then they goggled at his money belt. The idea of Ross Haveril having two coins to run together!

He unbuckled the belt and threw it at Luke Oliver.

"Take a look-see, you mountain-bred scion of a long string of alligator ancestors," chuckled Ross Haveril.

Luke took the belt over to the rickety table under the least dim of the lamps, opened its several pouches and poured the contents out. There was gold and there were banknotes.

Luke counted roughly, just making a guess. "Watch me drop dead!" he breathed.

"It'll be a good job," grinned Ross.

"You damn jackass!" yelled Luke. "You got close to a hundred thousand dollars here! What bank did you rob? You've got to take this money back. We'll get you out of it somehow. Then, damn you, you go back to South America. No, South Africa is further. You better go there."

Ross didn't even take time to tuck his shirt in before he pounced on Luke Oliver. He grabbed him up in his arms, and did a waltz up and down the room, with Luke kicking like a steer.

"Luke! Luke, you old son of a Senegambian! We're going places, old feller! You and me, and maybe Bob, too, unless I steal his Rose and make him mad and he tries to burn us down! You old fool, the pinch of money that's in that belt is just a whisper down the wind! There's more where that came from, and it's all ours."

"You've gone crazy," said Luke, red in the face and hot around the collar when Ross finally set him down. "Or, what I mean is, you always was crazy."

Bob Roberts had not said a word but now, white around the lips, he faced his old friend squarely.

"Ross," he said soberly, "I was mighty glad to see you tonight, to have you come back to us. But I don't know what the years have done to you since I saw you last. I don't much like your talk tonight. It happens that you've talked of the name of a certain young lady in a way I didn't like. Maybe you're drunk and maybe you're sober; how the hell can I tell? Suppose we let everything ride over for another day. Come up to my place tomorrow, or I'll come down here."

"Now wait, kid, you keep your shirt on—"

But Bob Roberts had had his say and left.

CHAPTER VIII

DARK HISTORY

ROSS turned again to Luke Oliver, who sat as still as a paralyzed man. "Luke! Luke, old-timer!" he said. "It's great to see your ugly mug again!"

Luke regarded him sourly.

"Me, I can't say the same," he growled. "Here you come staggering back after poking into all the dirty ports of the world, lousy with money, and, me, I know damn well you never worked for a penny of it. And somehow, I feel it in my bones, I'll have to dig you up out of a new scrape. Only I got a notion to call the sheriff in and see you hung up by the neck. It'd be just what you deserve."

Ross Haveril's laughter almost lifted the roof off the house.

"You old fraud, Luke Oliver! How in merry hell did I live so many years without you? Put on your hat!"

"What for?" demanded Luke. "To go traipsing somewhere with the likes of you?"

"Luke! The years have made a sinking wreck out of you—" He swept Luke's battered hat off the table and clapped it down on his old friend's semibald cranium. "Come ahead, kid. We're going places. Just the two of us."

"I got a notion where," sighed Luke.

"Make your bet, kid."

"Over to look at Rose Devlin. Then on to look at Rita Valdez! Hell, you make me sick!"

"Wherever we're going, let's go," said Ross Haveril impatiently.

Luke twisted his head about on its skinny neck. "Sure," he said. "Let's go. And we'll just leave the money belt where it lays. Shucks, it's only about enough money to buy a half share of the U. S. A., with part of Mexico throwed in, so what do we care?"

Ross Haveril turned back and stuffed the money into the pockets of the broad leather belt, and then the two men went to the barn, got their horses and started riding. They headed across Secret Valley toward the west. Thus they had ahead of them the Mountain House and Lost Valley where Tom Storm held forth, and even Paradise Valley.

"They're both nice girls," Luke told him. "Neither of them is for the likes of you. Both Tom Storm and Bob Roberts are in love with Black Jack's girl, but I hear tell that Storm is going to marry Rita Valdez just because he wants the Valdez money and Paradise Valley. So I guess Bob will marry Rose Devlin, and Bob's a friend of yours, ain't he? So, as far as you go, it's hands off. If you want you a girl, you better go back to South America."

"That sounds like Tom Storm," said Haveril. "He'll love one girl and marry the other for the sake of money! The hell he will! Maybe I'll pass Bob's girl up and go courting the señorita, just to cut Storm out! It's an idea, huh, Luke?"

"You're a trouble-maker and always was. You'd do a thing like that if you could. But I guess both of them girls are safe from you. They can see higher than the under side of a worm."

He sounded as though he meant it, but Ross only laughed.

"You haven't told me," Luke reminded him, "where we're going. And you haven't told me about that money."

"If you tend to your business, I'll tend to mine," said Ross.

THEY rode down to the little river and splashed across at the ford, their feet lifted from their stirrups, the water swirling up to their horses' bellies. There were glints of light in the dark water like sparks fallen from the bright, brittle stars.

"There was a fellow that Storm and I used to know," Ross Haveril said after a long silence. "He and Storm got to be friends. His name was Hale—Willard Hale. He didn't come up this way with Storm, did he?"

"Nope," said Luke. "Not that I know of." But he bit the last words off short. "Hale? he repeated, "Willard Hale?"

"Yes," said Haveril.

"I'm thinking," Luke said thoughtfully. "There was a feller that was with Storm a couple of years ago. I ain't sure I remember his name. Maybe it was Hale. Sounds kind of like it."

"What about him?" asked Ross. "Not here any longer?"

"Nary. In heaven or the other place, depending. Dead."

"Dead? Willard Hale? What happened?"

"Killed, if he's the man you mean. He was staying with Storm over in Lost Valley. Storm had a mean horse. He's got the brute yet. A big red stud that everybody in fifty miles knows. They call him Destruction. Hale—if that was the feller's name—must've been drunk. They found him next morning in old Destruction's stall. The stallion had stomped him to death. It was a mess. I saw it. Turned me squeamish."

"I'd like to know if it was Hale," muttered Haveril. "You see, Luke, it was like this: There were just the two of us at first, Tom Storm and me. Then down in Rio we picked up another American, a New Englander he was, but not what you'd think a New Englander would be. Wild as a wild cat was Willard Hale. Later, he and Storm got as thick as thieves. When Storm did me out of what was mine, Hale played in with him. The two blew along together. I've always thought they were in cahoots to skin me. So . . . well, I'd like to know!"

"Better be careful, kid," snapped Luke, "or you'll be telling me something!"

"I'll tell you everything, old-timer. Everything I know. Only just give me time, will you?"

"Maybe," said Luke, "you'll even break down and tell me whose bank you robbed or what train you held up to get that hundred thousand dollars you've got wrapped around your belly!"

"It's kind of funny," Ross continued, "about a horse massacring Willard Hale. Not many horses do that. Not many men end up that way. Yes, it's kind of funny. How many people saw it happen?"

"What are you driving at?" Luke said impatiently. "I told you they found him in the stall next morning. Nobody saw it, nobody but old Destruction."

THEY jogged along, silent again. Ross Haveril, riding the old trails, finding memories in rocks and trees and crooks in the trail, was moodily thoughtful. But, having things on his mind, at last he spoke up.

"So Tom Storm, who had never been in this part of the world, came here as straight as a homing pigeon, because of the things I'd told him. Because, being lonesome and homesick, I'd told him all about Secret

Valley and Lost Valley and Paradise, and he got hungry for it. It's the sweetest land in the world, Luke."

"Don't I know it?"

"Maybe. Maybe so. Anyhow, it goes like this. Tom Storm, his pockets heavy with gold he lifted out of my jeans, comes up here and brings Will Hale along with him, and grabs off Lost Valley. And he and Hale had their times together, and they got drunk together, and they maybe fell together for the same girl. Then Storm's stallion murders Willard Hale—with nobody seeing it done! Do you want to make me laugh, you old sidewinder?"

"Dammit, I've asked you once, what are you driving at?"

"Never mind," said Ross Haveril. "Let's go!"

"And you ain't said yet where we're going! I've got me a notion to block your trail right here, to yank you down offn your high horse and spank hell out of you like I used to when you was three-four years old. In your head you ain't much older now."

"Just what sort of bird is this little rooster Valdez anyhow?" Ross asked abruptly. "Is he a rattlesnake, scorpion, tarantula—or just plain horned toad?"

"What's Valdez done to you?" asked Luke.

"He's bought me out—hide, hoof and horns. Gave me a hundred dollars to sell my soul to him. And, me, I took the hundred! I've got it yet."

"Valdez loses," Luke grunted. "You ain't got no soul and never did have."

"What's between Valdez and Tom Storm?"

"Friendship, I reckon. They're together a lot. The Spanish gent is quite some gambler, or thinks he is. Anyhow he's always gambling and always losing. He goes to his good friend Storm for money. Storm always has money and lends it to him."

"And takes a mortgage on Paradise Valley?"

Luke shrugged. "How do I know? Maybe."

"They're friends, are they? And Valdez gives me a hundred dollars to tell him what Storm ever did to me to make me call him the things I called him tonight! Valdez himself names Storm a yellow dog! And Storm is in love with the Devlin girl —and wants to marry the Valdez kid? Luke, old boy, I've a notion that life at times can still be interesting!"

"Damn you, Ross!" Luke seemed really to have lost his temper. "I don't know that I'll go any further along with you! You haven't said a single word about where you got all that money. Me, I'm no sissy about things, but if you've gone in for highway robbery, like I'm pretty sure you have, well, you paddle your own canoe and let me swim to shore."

"Luke! I've got me a notion! Yes, I was on my way for a visit with Storm, but that can wait. What I wanted, before I beat the pup half to death, was to clear off that mortgage on Secret Valley. But then Storm, too, will be asking where all the money came from. I don't want that. Let him think I'm broke. Let Valdez think that, too, and everybody else. You and me will pop back to Black Jack's and take a whirl at faro or the wheel! We'll clean up a few thousand and then go along to Storm with our fairly won money."

Ross Haveril dug down to his money belt and shoved a handful of gold and crumpled bills into Luke's leathery old hand.

"There's around five thousand, Luke," he said. "You take it. Let folks think it's yours. Me, I'll borrow some from you. We'll bust the bank."

"I won't do anything of the kind!" Luke exploded, trying to force the money back into Ross' hand.

"You sanctimonious old sockdologer!" Ross grinned. "Since when have you been so fussy you wouldn't touch a dollar unless it was scrubbed with soap and sandpaper first?"

"How do I know what a man you've turned out to be?" countered Luke in dead earnest. "If it's money that some sheriff is on the trail of, I don't want it, thanks."

"You think, Luke, that maybe I'm a thief, huh?" said Haveril. The twinkle was still in his eye.

Luke snorted. "Hell, *no!* You're still a Haveril, ain't you, no matter what else maybe you've turned into. But a highway robber? That's different. Me, I wouldn't know. Not unless you told me."

Ross Haveril burst out in one of his thundering laughs.

"All right, Nosy Bill, I'll tell you."

AND as they rode along, Ross sketched his life during the last dozen years. When Tom Storm and Willard Hale decamped, they had taken all the ready and available cash. They had sold certain mineral rights which resided in their three names, adding a dash of crude yet effective forgery to their other crimes. They had left him, as they thought, without one copper coin to rub against another.

Yet he had been able to hold on to a couple of their string of claims which they had agreed were worthless. And after six months of painful yet never-relaxing endeavor, he hit color.

Thereafter he lived through what seemed an endless period of lean years and fat years, and the streaks of lean were wider and thicker and more frequent than the streaks of fat. And as time passed he found himself always moving northward until he knew Central America from end to end. Finally he reached Mexico—

"And, of all things," grinned Ross, "I struck oil. That's how come the long green in the money belt, Luke. And there's more just like it."

"A fool for luck," commented Luke. "That's the Haveril in you."

A fool for luck! Ross Haveril didn't say anything, but a smile touched his lips as he thought back over those years that a score of times had had him beaten to his knees—years that had both broken his heart for him and then mended it as, he had thought a time or two, a ministering physician might work patiently upon a man to have him in good shape against the day that had been set for his hanging.

Luke didn't miss much, and saw that twisting of the young man's mouth. "The kid's had tough going," he thought. "But it didn't down him and he's come out right. I wish to hell his ma could be here right now to take a slant at him—at that, how the hell do I know? Maybe she is!"

They rode on in silence for awhile, then Ross suddenly reined in his horse.

CHAPTER IX

BREAKING THE BANK

ROSS HAVERIL led the way straight up the ridge, taking the steep old trail up to Black Jack Devlin's place. The Mountain House was still bright with its kerosene lamps flashing their lights from twelve-inch silvered reflectors. The

roulette ball was clicking its lively staccato around its small bowl of fortune. There was the dry sound of poker chips, and dice were rolling, while above these lesser sounds rose the rumbling, small thunder of men's voices.

Ross Haveril came as far as the door and stood looking things over. All eyes in the room focused on him. By now everyone here knew he was the vagabond Haveril returned after so many years, and had seen or heard of his encounter with Tom Storm. So for a short second the room was stilled. Cards stopped riffling and poker chips ceased clicking and even the merry little ivory ball lay still and untouched where it had fallen on the wheel.

Ross went straight to Black Jack Devlin.

"I'm not here to make trouble, Devlin," he said. "If Storm was here it might be different, but he's gone. You know my old friend, Luke Oliver. He was on his way over to Storm's to pay off a mortgage. But I got him to come in here and take a whirl at doubling his money. He's going to stake me and we're both going to play—and be peaceable."

"That's fine," said Black Jack. "Name your game, Haveril."

He looked at Luke Oliver speculatively and Ross knew he was wondering where Luke had got any money.

Ross took stock of the room's gaming possibilities. He liked poker, but he didn't see a game running that promised quick action and sizable stakes. There was faro, and the Devlin girl was perched on her lookout stool above it. Well, faro was good clean fun. Then there were dice games, and dice roll fast. And there was roulette.

"I'll play roulette if I can get that kid of Devlin's to deal!" he thought.

He hadn't so much as looked at her so far as she could tell. Yet an hour or so ago he had cried out, "Girl!" and had seemed ready to snatch her away from under her father's roof and gallop off into the wilderness with her. And now he ignored her.

He strolled over to the faro layout and stood watching the play. Then he appeared for the first time to notice her. He pulled off his hat.

"Evening, miss," he said courteously.

Rose-alba inclined her head. "Good evening," she said. "Is it faro then?"

He shook his head. "Do you deal roulette?"

"Does a fish swim, mister?" she countered.

"Luke!" called Haveril. "Come over here. How much money you got?"

"How much you want, Ross?" asked Luke.

"I'd like a million," said Haveril. "But I'll take a few hundred. Got a thousand? Maybe two-three thousand? Gimme!"

He thrust out his hand. Again the room was hushed. Who ever heard a question like that put to Luke Oliver? When did Luke ever have more than enough for the next pair of boots?

Luke pulled from his pocket the mess of gold and wadded banknotes and counted out three thousand dollars to Ross Haveril.

"Come again, Luke," said Ross. "Three never was my lucky number. Another thousand, old-timer."

Luke gave him another thousand. This thousand Ross promptly handed to Ross-alba Devlin.

"That's yours, kid," he said, "if

you'll deal a few spins at the wheel for me."

ROSE DEVLIN turned red. She started to throw the money back into his face. But she checked that impulse and slid down off her stool. Without saying a word, she led the way to the roulette table and the dealer surrendered his place to her. Then she tossed Ross Haveril's money down.

"I don't like you or anything about you, mister," she said icily, "nor do I want any of your charity, especially seeing it's Luke Oliver's and not yours. If you want to get rid of your money, plank down your bet and the house will take it fast enough."

Ross stood looking at her with nothing but a very lively admiration in his eyes.

"I'm giving you that thousand dollars, Rose Devlin," he said stubbornly.

"You're doing nothing of the sort, Ross Haveril! I won't take it! Now do you want to play or—"

"I'm ready," he declared.

She spun the wheel and the ivory pellet went spinning dizzily.

"I'm betting a thousand dollars on the red," said Ross. "That's because I know that black is coming up! See? And you'll rake in the thousand, and that's my present to you. And on the side I'm betting you—*you*, Rose Devlin—I'm betting you the drinks for the house that black does come up and that I lose my thousand!"

He put his thousand-dollar bet down on the red, his eyes teasing and mocking her.

"I'll take you," she said, because it was next to impossible for Jack Devlin's daughter to refuse any wager.

The ball leaped down into the bowl and began clicking, seeming to have great difficulty in making up its mind whether for red or black, odd or even, whether for this, that or the other number. But Ross didn't look at it. Even when it stopped, he kept looking at the girl's face to see whether he could tell that way what the result was.

No, he couldn't tell a thing. Black Jack had taught her too well to mask her features. So at last he looked down. And then he burst out into one of his booming laughs.

"Oho!" he shouted. "It's like I told you! It's black and so you take the thousand! It's black, so you buy the drinks for the house! I win both ways!"

There were men there who looked from him to one another, and their looks said, "The man's crazy!" Because there was no doubting his sincerity, his high delight. He had lost the thousand dollars that he had promised her, and he had stuck her for the drinks all round!

Rose Devlin raked in the money. She turned to the bar.

"Hannigan," she said coolly, but her color was higher than ever, "the drinks are on me." Then from under high-lifted brows, her head thrown back, looking down her nose at him with as haughty a look as she could summon, she said, "Champagne, Mr. Haveril?"

"Bless your soul, I could love you!" roared Haveril, more delighted than ever. "Champagne, yes. If you drink with me!"

She made her smile as cruel as a knife blade. "Thank you."

"And now," he warned her as their glasses sparkled with golden liquid, "friendship ceases. Watch me. If your wheel's not much crookeder

than a dog's hind leg I'm going to break the bank."

They drank and, with all others drinking and with a dense crowd gathered about the table, Ross Haveril started in to play.

"What's the ceiling?" he asked.

"Take the roof off for him," said Black Jack Devlin, standing at his daughter's elbow.

She shook her head. "No! This man has gone partners with the devil. And who's running this wheel anyhow?"

"What do you want, Haveril?" asked Devlin.

"A run for my money," said Ross, "but it'll have to be snappy. I've got places to go."

"Make your bets," said Devlin. "I'll cover if I have to give you the house. Let her roll, Rose."

ROSS scattered five hundred dollars across the table haphazardly, playing numbers he had hunches on, at about a hundred dollars each. He lost, and Rose Devlin raked in her winnings indifferently.

Again he put down five hundred dollars, placing a hundred on each of five numbers. Again the wheel spun and the ivory ball raced while he stood watching not the game but the girl. Then for the first time he became aware that Bob Roberts had returned and was now standing behind Rose. His eyes were grave and troubled.

None of Haveril's numbers came up. Two thousand of the four was gone in three quick plays.

"We don't want to drag this thing out all night," he said. He handed over his remaining two thousand. "Let me have four chips."

"Each chip is five hundred, Mr. Haveril."

"You're good at arithmetic," he grinned. "Let's see how fast you can figure out how much thirty-five times five hundred is."

"Seventeen thousand, five," Rose answered promtply.

Ross placed one of the chips on the double zero, one on the seventeen, one on eleven, one on the last number, thirty-six. And again, while every other person in the room watched the wheel, he kept his eyes steadily on Rose-alba's face. "I'll bet I read the answer in her face this time!" he said.

The ball seemed more hesitant, clicking and bouncing and skittering. But at last it stopped. The tale was told, and the room was hushed. Still Ross kept his eyes on the girl. Slowly she lifted her head and looked straight into his eyes, hers as steady as his. He could not detect the faintest hint as to whether she had won or lost.

He looked swiftly at the table. Exactly as he had done on the first bet he burst out into laughter. There was no malice in it, only unaffected delight.

For the chip he had placed on number thirty-six had won. He had won seventeen thousand five hundred dollars. His net gain on the play was sixteen thousand dollars.

"Do you wish chips or the cash, Mr. Haveril?" said Rose Devlin. She might have been asking him if he'd have another drink.

"Chips of course!" Then he turned to Luke Oliver. "How about it, Luke? Since it's your money and I'm just having the fun of playing for you, maybe you'd better speak up before it's too late!"

Luke glared at him but kept his mouth shut.

"Fine!" Ross said, as though accepting Luke's baleful look as permission to go ahead.

"Drygulchers got young Roberts!" yelled Luke. "Burn 'em down, Ross!"

Gunfire split the night and then they were fighting furiously with unseen gunmen.

The girl's deft fingers stacked the chips swiftly. Ross gathered them in.

A brief glance passed between Rose-alba and her father. But she did not so much as lift her brows, and Black Jack neither shook his head nor nodded nor shrugged his shoulders.

The wheel spun, the ball raced—and this time Ross Haveril found himself watching Bob Roberts standing so close to Devlin's daughter. He thought he saw Bob's jaw tighten, and that something like hardness had come into his eyes.

"He loves that girl with everything that's in him," thought Ross. He watched Bob carefully.

Then he returned his attention to the table and swiftly placed his bet. With the ball still whirring he shoved his stack, which now represented eighteen thousand dollars, on the red.

As before, all eyes but his were on the play, but this time it was not at the girl's face that he looked but at Bob Roberts'. Bob's jaws were

set harder than ever, and Ross understood. In Bob's eyes it was not Devlin whom he was playing, but Black Jack's daughter. And maybe Bob knew that if Ross Haveril's crazy luck stood good for another play or two she was apt to be in a spot where she would know the pinch of poverty.

The ball clicked, fell and stopped —and Ross saw a sudden contraction of Bob's muscles about mouth and eyes.

Red had come up. Haveril's eighteen thousand was now thirty-six.

BLACK JACK was used to taking losses as he was used to winning, and he gave no sign. His daughter looked as cool and unmoved as he. But her voice was tonelss, quiet when she asked:

"Cash or chips, Mr. Haveril?"

"Chips!" he told her. "Let's have chips!"

Then Black Jack Devlin said as tonelessly as Rose had spoken, "I have no desire to welch, but in fairness to you, Mr. Haveril, I must tell you that, not having been prepared for any considerable play tonight, the cash on hand is limited. Suppose you should make another play like that and win. The house would owe you a total of more than seventy thousand dollars. I haven't that amount on hand."

Haveril regarded him steadily, for Devlin had said, "Take the roof off for him." And he had also said, "I'll cover you if I have to give you the house."

Perhaps Black Jack caught his thought. Certainly he remembered his own words of a few minutes ago.

"In case you should win all my ready cash and continued to go on playing," he added, "I'd do as I promised and stake my house here."

"What value do you put on it?" asked Haveril.

"A hundred thousand, lock, stock and barrel."

Ross turned to Luke Oliver.

"How about it, Luke? Seeing it's your money, you better speak up. Want Devlin's place here? Worth a hundred thousand to you?"

"What the hell would I do with a place like this?" Luke snapped.

"Let's go," said Ross and turned back to Rose Devlin. "If I can break the bank for Luke he's of a mind to let you keep a roof over your head."

She didn't hesitate. Again the little ivory ball went spinning.

The crowd was tight-jammed about the table now. Men were standing on tiptoes and craning their necks to watch. Mountain House had not seen many nights like this.

But Haveril was in no hurry to play. He, too, stood watching the ball, waiting for a "hunch." At last, while there was still time, he decided.

"Eighteen thousand on red to repeat," he said.

They didn't have to wait long now; the ball was almost spent. It dropped into the bowl, skipped and clicked and stopped.

Red had repeated!

Ross didn't laugh this time. A man can't keep on laughing spontaneously at the same joke. And there was Bob Roberts with a stricken look on his face.

While Rose drew the cloth cover over the table, Black Jack Devlin counted out fifty-four thousand dollars, some in gold, the greater part in yellowbacks.

"That's all tonight, boys," Black Jack said to the hushed room. "The bank is flat."

Ross Haveril gathered up his gleanings, snatched off Luke Oliver's

battered old hat and dropped the money into it.

"Here you are, Luke," he said. "Go have yourself a time. But keep in mind I worked like a good and faithful servant for you tonight, so if some day I come to your back door for a hand-out, you'll maybe throw in a cup of coffee with it."

Then he pushed his way through the crowd and went out.

Luke Oliver stood like a man in a dream. He opened his mouth to say something to Black Jack Devlin, something to Black Jack's daughter, but he couldn't think of anything to say.

He hurried after Ross Haveril, muttering under his breath to himself, holding his old hat gingerly in both hands.

CHAPTER X

THE AMBUSH

AS the door closed behind Haveril and Luke the gaming room's silence was shattered by an explosive outbreak of talk. Some men went back to the bar for a drink or two before the long ride home. Others stood in groups discussing the thing they had watched happen. Many wanted to know all about Ross Haveril, just who and what he was and where he had come from.

Rose-alba Devlin didn't even look at her father. She moved toward the door, meaning to slip out alone and into the darkness of the porch. Bob Roberts followed her.

"Not now, Bob," she said wearily.

"Listen. I want to talk to you—"

"About that friend of yours? Ross Haveril? Or is he a man at all, or the devil popping up for a holiday?"

Skilled as she was in hiding her emotions, he knew what it meant to her to have lost so heavily.

"I don't know that he is a friend of mine," he said.

"Why? Because he won?"

"No. Not that. Because of something else that happened down in Secret Valley after we left here. Something said."

She opened the door and went out and left it open to show that he might follow if he cared to.

At the bar Hannigan was gloomily setting forth bottles and glasses.

"That bum, that tramp Haveril," he growled, "sure has the devil's own luck."

Black Jack Devlin left the room, passing through a door that led deeper into the sprawling house. As he did so, his eye caught the eye of a man who already was watching him keenly. There was a hungry look in that man's eye. Black Jack made the slightest possible gesture, an almost imperceptible lifting of the chin, the merest drooping of an eyelid.

The man was Bull Strake, built like a gorilla, black-bearded, small-eyed and thin-lipped. Strake went to the bar. A glance over his shoulder drew three men to his side, two of the Bedloe boys, and Jake Godown of mixed blood.

The four gulped their liquor down and went outside. Bob Roberts and the Devlin girl, standing on the porch, saw them go to their horses, swarm up into their saddles and speed away.

LUKE OLIVER followed young Haveril to their horses. There he blew up.

"Take it, damn you," he muttered. "I wouldn't touch it again with a ten-foot pole, and I'll tell you why. It ain't mine, to begin with. And besides that, it was won with stolen money. And besides—"

"Pshaw, Luke!" said Ross.

"Take it, dammit, or I'll dump it on the ground!"

So Ross scooped the money out of the hat, using both hands and stuffing it into his pockets.

"Come ahead then, old sorehead," said Ross, and Luke knew he was grinning as he went up into the saddle.

"No! Me, I'm going home."

But he turned his horse to follow Ross, and exploded again:

"And haven't you got sense enough to know it's the biggest fool thing you could do to go riding through this country with a barrel of money on you like you've got now? It's like begging a lot of timber wolves to go visit a fat sheep."

"Shucks, Luke. Those boys are not a gang of cutthroats. Most of them—"

"It's a lot you know about them," grunted Luke. "There's a dozen in that house right this minute that would pop a string of bullets into you for five hundred dollars, let alone a thousand. And fifty thousand—whew!"

He yanked off the hat which he had just clapped on, and massaged his brow with a horny set of fingers.

"One thing," he added. "Most likely they'll think we're headed back to Secret Valley. I guess it might be lucky after all that we're riding the other way."

"I notice you still wear a .45," remarked Haveril. "I'll bet it's the same old cannon you had when I was a kid, I'll bet I've shot it many a time. Got a rabbit with it once, remember? And me, I've got into the habit of wearing a shoulder holster. If the boys should get it into their heads to start some fun I'll bet we'd get as many of them as they get of us!"

"Not me," declared Luke. "I'd duck into the brush and let you fight it out by yourself."

But all Ross did was to reach out and clap him on the shoulder and laugh at him. Then Haveril began to speak of plans.

"Tom Storm's and my personal affair can wait a while, I guess," he said. "He won't run away and neither will I. First of all we're going to clear off that mortgage he holds on Secret Valley. Then, Luke, old boy, if you're willing to sell it back to a Haveril, you will name your price and I'll pay it."

"I don't know that I will," grumbled Luke.

HALF a mile from the Mountain House they struck into a steep zigzag trail which led down from the ridge to a long open stretch of benchland, set like a broad step on the mountainside. But before they dropped down to this strip of level land, and despite the noise of their horses' hoofs clanging on rocky going and starting stones rolling, they heard the clatter of hoofs following. Luke jerked his head around, listened intently a moment.

"What did I tell you?" he observed angrily yet with a grim sort of relish in his tone. "There they come, four or five men after us, and riding hell-for-leather."

"Some of the boys," said Ross. "With the games shut down they'll be going somewhere else."

"They're in a right smart hurry, kid. Suppose you and me step along, too."

So the two made the best speed they could on the steep descent, and soon came to the level. Doing so, they rode out of the dark of the rocky trail, coming out at length into the starlight. They heard the following hoofbeats still louder. The

unseen riders, riding hard, were overtaking them.

"The fools will break a horse's leg that way!" said Ross angrily. "They must be drunk."

"Drunk, your foot! They've smelled easy money. Enough to make a gang like them rich for life. Wearing spurs, ain't you? Know how to use 'em?"

"If you happen to be right—well, it's not much fun running away, Luke."

"It's more fun than being robbed, kid. Twice as much fun as being dead."

They spurred their horses and rode furiously along the stretch of level land. They had not gone far when the men behind them came down the higher trail and to the rim of the benchland.

"Hey, there!" a voice shouted. "Hold on a minute."

Ross didn't stop, but he slowed down and turned in the saddle.

"What do you want?" he called back. "Who are you anyhow?"

"Wait a shake," came the answer.

"Looks like you're right, Luke," admitted Ross.

"Let's go then."

"Get into it. I'm with you."

Luke shot ahead like a dark blur in the night. Ross followed, though reluctantly. An instant later as he turned to glance behind him the crackle of gunfire broke out and he saw hot angry spits of flame.

Ross swung his horse in an arc as he dragged his gun out of its holster and fired twice in answer to the gun flares.

Luke, cursing him roundly, slowed down.

"You crazy fool, let 'em be. Stop to fight and they're bound to get you."

"They can't hit anything, riding like that, and us riding, and the light what it is."

"If they can't, then you can't, so what's the use—"

"I might be lucky," said Ross. "Seems as though it was my lucky night. You scoot along, Luke. I'll overtake you."

Their pursuers had slowed down when Ross started shooting. He could catch the slower beat of their horses' hoofs. Perhaps they thought he had stopped to fight it out and so were coming on more deliberately.

Luke Oliver continued to drench Ross with strong language and a wrathful insistence that they dig in their spurs and get clear of this mess, but he, too, had started shooting.

At last he and Ross could see their pursuers clearly enough to count them. There were four men, and the starlight showed one of their mounts to be a palomino.

Luke was about to call out to Ross that he knew one of the riders and could guess the others, when a new factor came into play. From some little distance behind the four men and above them on the trail that led down from the Mountain House, still another man called out, and his voice rang clear and distinct in the stillness that came briefly between shots.

"You, Strake!" the voice shouted. "You, Bull Strake! Watch your step!"

"Why, that's Bob Roberts' voice!" Ross exclaimed. "He's followed after them!"

A roar burst from the bull-throated Strake. His gun flashed and he began pouring lead uptrail where, evidently, he could make out young Bob Roberts riding down upon him. For, although Strake's

party and both Luke and Ross had stopped abruptly, Bob Roberts kept coming on.

"Good old Bob!" shouted Ross, and he charged back across the benchland. "Good boy, Bob! We've got the rats between us! Give 'em hell, Bob!"

Then Luke Oliver, almost weeping in his rage, jabbed his spurs home, and came thundering along close behing Ross.

Now suddenly, still another factor entered the game. Just as Bob Roberts had taken a hand, all without advance notice, so now did another man, one who had been lurking in the dark at the base of the steep declivity down which Bob Roberts was riding. That man kept his mouth shut, but both Ross and Luke saw the flash of his gun.

He fired several times in quick succession, and they couldn't tell which group he was fighting for. But after firing, he raced away, deeper into the shadows, heading up toward the other end of the flat. And they realized all of a sudden that Bob Roberts had ceased firing.

"Damn him!" Luke Oliver stormed. "Some jasper, hid in the dark, has drygulched young Roberts! Damn 'em all, kid. Let's go get 'em!"

But Ross was already on his way. He, too, saw the thing as Luke had seen it. Someone, not of Bull Strake's party, had taken sides, shooting Bob out of his saddle and then running for it.

So, of a sudden, roles were reversed, and it was two men, grim with fury, who bore down upon the four who had attacked them.

They rode straight into a crackle of gunfire, saw the angry flashes, and kept on riding. For a little while they held their fire. Bullets whined about them but they did not answer, knowing that there would be no second chance to reload. Then:

"Burn 'em down, kid!" yelled Luke. He yanked his horse back on its haunches, slid to the ground and opened fire.

Young Haveril's boots struck the ground almost the second Luke's did. Their shots were sped simultaneously. Strake, the two Bedloe boys and Jake Go-down had counted on a surprise attack. They had been overconfident. Now Bull emitted a roar, wheeled his horse and led the retreat. The others were at his heels, dodging lead as they rode, bent low over their horses' manes. And they, like the unknown man who had hidden in the dark and shot Bob Roberts, raced northward toward the upper end of the flat.

"Leave 'em go, kid," said Luke, when their guns were again hot and empty. "We didn't get 'em this time, but we know who they are. And we better go see about Bob. There ain't been a cheep out of him. I fear me, Ross."

They rode back to the steep trail, then up it for the short distance and saw at last the blurred outline of a horse standing riderless.

BOB ROBERTS lay beside the trail, silent and motionless, Luke reached him first and went down on his knees. The two men looked at each other in the faint starlight. At first they thought Bob was already dead, but their groping hands found there was still life in him.

"Bob," said Ross Haveril gently, more gently than Luke had ever heard him speak before. "Bob, old man."

"He's shot in the chest, high up," said Luke. "Try to find a pine knot,

Ross, or something to make a light. We got to stop the blood."

Bob tried to say something. The muscles in his neck relaxed, his head rolled sideways and his eyelids came down like heavy curtains.

"Dead!" whispered Ross.

"No," said Luke. "But damn near dead, Ross. Maybe we can stop this hemorrhage before he bleeds to death."

By the smoke-veiled light from a pine knot they did their best with scraps of cloth from their own shirts to stanch the blood.

"We've got to get him somewhere," said Luke.

"Moving him is like to kill him. Leaving him here is sure to."

"Back to the Mountain House. There's nowhere else," Luke declared.

"No," said Ross. "It's about the same distance to Tom Storm's place in Lost Valley. And from here on the going is easy. To carry him back uptrail to the Mountain House would shake him to pieces. What's more, I guess our best bet for a doctor is in Liberty."

"I don't like it," muttered Luke. "He and Tom Storm hate each other like poison. And remember Bob tied into Storm tonight to finish your fight for you."

"Just the same," maintained Ross, "even Tom Storm wouldn't pitch out a man in Bob's shape. It's his only chance, if he's got any at all."

He went for his horse and said from his place behind the saddle:

"Hand him up to me, Luke. This horse'll stand for it."

When Luke got his arms about Bob's still form and heaved to raise it, a stab of pain wrenched the wounded man back to semconsciousness. He started to speak in a low, indistinct voice.

"Rose-alba . . . see, dear . . . I told you . . . my lucky night! Rose-alba, we are going to . . . Do you remember—"

The murmurings ceased. Luke stared up at Ross.

"We better go back to Black Jack's, kid. He'd like that best."

Ross shook his head again.

"No. The other way is the best. I'll take him. I'll have to ride slow. You pound the trail back to the Mountain House and tell the Devlins. You can bring the girl with you. You ought to be at Storm's by the time I get there."

Between them they got Bob into the saddle. Ross put an arm about him, supporting him, and started slowly downtrail. Luke watched for the few minutes it took for them to get out of sight, then hurried back to the Mountain House.

CHAPTER XI

AN ENEMY'S HOSPITALITY

THOUGH Ross Haveril did not dare hasten, neither did he loiter, and he came first with his burden down onto the floor of Lost Valley, then across Lost River and through broad, oak-studded fields along a faint wagon track which brought him to Storm's ranchhouse. He saw the lights from far off, twinkling through the oaks.

At the high white picket fence surrounding the grounds he shouted for someone to open the gate. But no one came, so he managed by forcing his horse close alongside the fence, to unfasten the gate. He rode along a path through young trees to the front porch. Still no door had opened.

He called again with the same lack of result, and began to wonder. With the house lighted up, there

should be someone about. Storm had left the Mountain House hours ago.

Steadying his horse, he slid to the ground and eased Roberts from the saddle. He carried his limp burden to the door, found it unlocked, opened it and entered Tom Storm's big living room.

There were tables with lamps on them and big easy-chairs in red and blue leather dotting a floor covered with a scattering of bearskins. In front of the wide-mouthed fireplace was a comfortable looking sofa. On that, with a cushion at its head, Ross carefully place Bob.

He stood a moment looking down into the bloodless face. He leaned close to mark an almost imperceptible breathing. Then he went hurrying through the house, calling softly.

The place remained hushed save for the sounds he himself made. His voice and his boot heels on uncarpeted floors echoed loudly. He went to the foot of the staircase and looked up. All was dark above so he came back along the hallway and turned in at the kitchen. There was a bottle on the table, and beside it a glass with a few drops of liquor in the bottom.

Assured there was no one in the house, he returned to the front room. Bob Roberts had not stirred.

Bob's chances, Ross knew, were running out on him with every flickering beat of a failing pulse. If help were to be had it must come with no unnnecessary delay. He hurried outside and ran around the house, headed for the men's quarters. Finally he saw a faint gleam of light. A dim candle, he judged, was still burning in the bunkhouse.

Still running, he rounded a corner of the barn and crashed full tilt into a man hurrying almost as swiftly as he was. This man was carrying a saddle and was about to turn in at the barn door.

"You blundering fool!" the man cried. "What the hell—"

"Storm?" demanded Ross Haveril. "That you, Storm?"

"Who the devil are you?" Storm exploded. Then, "Haveril? Ross Haveril here at my place?"

"I've been looking everywhere for you. Rout one of your men out, tell him to get a horse saddled the quickest way and come to the house. You come with me. Hurry, man!"

"Look here, what's all this—"

BUT Ross had already whirled and was hurrying back to the ranchhouse. He realized that no matter how a messenger might hurry to get a doctor, it would be hours before one would be located and brought back here. Meantime Bob's condition demanded some sort of first aid. So he paid no attention to Tom Storm shouting after him.

And Storm, after hurriedly disposing of his saddle in the harness room at the barn, came striding along after him.

Ross Haveril was baring Bob's chest to have a good look at the wound by lamplight when he heard Storm coming from the kitchen. He straightened up and turned about. Storm came striding forward, his face flushed and hot, his eyes bright with the fury which Ross' presence had whipped up in him, a torrent of words seething up to his lips. Then he saw the man on the couch.

The blood that had reddened his face seeped out of it and before Ross Haveril's astounded eyes Tom Storm turned white. So, too, did the rage seem to drain out of him, to be replaced by a look of utter fright.

Ross Haveril knew Tom Storm for

a hard man. He knew that Storm had no love for Bob Roberts, that the two hated each other. Yet now, as Tom Storm saw the man he hated lying there in the grip of death, he was mightily moved. It was very strange indeed.

"Hello," Storm muttered. "It's Roberts. What happened?"

"Shot," Haveril answered. "He's in bad shape, Storm. Did you get a man started for a horse?"

"No. I wanted to know what it was all about. I'll send a man on the run for Doc Keplin. That means all the way to Liberty. Not much chance of getting him here until some time tomorrow morning."

Before he finished speaking he was on his way outside again. Ross Haveril turned back to Roberts.

He was working over the scarcely breathing man with warm water and iodine and tape and bandages which he had found in Storm's medicine cabinet when the front door was flung open and Rose Devlin came running into the room.

She, like Tom Storm before her, came to an abrupt halt, and her hands flew up to her breast. Then she gave a little cry, spun about and fled the room. Ross heard her crying out hysterically:

"I can't! *Oh, I can't!*"

Now Bob's lips began moving, shaping words with tremendous difficulty.

"Rose? You are here . . . Rose?"

"Yes," said Ross. "She's here, Bob. She came right away."

"Rose," said Bob. Then, "No. Rose isn't here. She's gone—"

"She'll be right back, Bob. She's just gone to bring you a glass of water."

Haveril hurried out to find the girl.

She was standing motionless, irresolute, her small, slight figure just a dark blur in the darkness. She heard his swift oncoming tread and started to run again, this time toward the horses which had brought her and Luke Oliver.

Ross caught her at the gate.

"You come back!" he commanded brusquely. "Bob wants you. He keeps asking for you."

"I can't, I tell you!" she cried hysterically.

"You're coming back to Bob. Can't you see he's dying?"

"That's why!" She began beating at his face with her small fists. "I can't watch him die—"

SO Ross went back to his friend, and knew that he was going to him for the last time and that Bob was dying because of him.

Bob stirred slightly at the sound of the faint footfall. Then Ross heard a long-drawn gasp. As far as Bob Roberts was concerned, everything on earth was gone.

On the porch Ross met Luke Oliver coming in.

"He's dead," Haveril said. "I'm going out to the barn to head that fellow off from riding for the doctor. I'll be right back."

"If you hadn't come back home tonight—" began Luke, his voice bitter.

"Yes, I know. Bob would be alive now," returned Haveril. He was building himself a cigarette with slow fingers. "While I'm out at the barn I'll get a wagon. We can't leave him here at Storm's. Where'll we take him, Luke?"

"Down to Liberty, I reckon. They've got a graveyard there and an undertaker and everything."

Tom Storm appeared suddenly. "How is Bob?" he asked.

"He's dead."

Storm didn't say anything. Ross

finished rolling his cigarette and lighted it. The match flare, reddening his face, showed it granite-hard.

"We want the loan of a wagon, Storm," he said.

"Sure," nodded Storm. "I'll get one of the boys to hitch up a team."

When Ross and Luke were on the wagon seat, their saddle horses tied at the tailend, Storm came up. He put his hand on a front wheel.

"The way things were tonight Haveril," he said deliberately, "I couldn't very well kick you off the place. But you're not welcome. Don't come again."

"I'll be back soon, Storm. Maybe tomorrow."

"Better not. I'm warning you. There's no business and there's no friendship between you and me."

"Luke has business with you," Ross told him. "I'll be coming with him."

CHAPTER XII

THREE-CORNERED PLOT

TOM STORM stood where he was a long while, watching the departing wagon until the darkness of the night absorbed it. Before he stirred, a hushed voice roused him.

"Tom, it's me. I want to talk with you."

"Damn you, Strake!"

"I can't help it," said Strake. "After what's happened I've got to talk to you. Nobody knows I'm here."

"Come into the house," Storm ordered.

"It was you, wasn't it, Tom?" asked Strake.

"What're you talking about?" Storm snapped.

"In the fight tonight up there on High Flat—"

"You crazy fool!" said Storm. He closed the door behind him.

Mirrored in the lamplight a darkening stain of blood was on the floor near the sofa. Tom Storm stood a moment scowling, then threw a Navajo rug to cover it.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I could do with a drink," said Bull Strake.

The two drank together. Storm had just set his glass aside when a rap sounded at the door.

"Damn it," rasped Storm. "Is the whole world running in on me tonight?" He sang out, with no ring of welcome in his tone, "Come in!"

Don Rodriguez Valdez y Munoz entered hurriedly.

"My friend!" exclaimed Valdez. "I began to worry. Now that I find you are all right, that you have suffered no ill effects from that cowardly blow from that man Hannigan and—"

Storm turned his back and went to a table for a cigar. Then he threw his big bulky body down into one of his deep red-leather chairs.

"Worried about your good friend, were you?" he jeered. "Why do you have to be such a damned liar, Valdez? If you were worried about me, you'd have been here long ago. What's on your mind?"

Valdez stiffened his small, slight body, but before he had progressed beyond an indignant, "*Señor!*" Storm was speaking again.

"You walked out when they put me down," he said bluntly. "You went about your business, whatever it was, and the devil knows it was crooked. Later you did get to worrying, but not about me. You'd laugh your head off if I was dead. What you thought was, 'I ran off and left my good friend, Tom Storm, and if I don't show up pretty soon with a mushy mouth full of palaver, he'll be sore as a boil, and I can't

afford to have *that* hombre get mad.' "

Valdez, straight as a ramrod, walked to the door. Storm called him back.

"Now that you're here, *amigo mio,*" he mocked, "better sit down. I want a talk with you."

Valdez, cloaked in chill dignity, turned a pair of hard, bright-black eyes upon his host.

"I will not listen to such language from anyone, señor!"

"Rats," said Storm. "I wonder where you've been and what you've been up to," he added.

"When you were carried home I tarried a little while at the Mountain House. Then, having been assured that you were not badly hurt, I stayed for a little while to lose my money." He made a wry face. "I lost it as usual with no great difficulty and started home. Nearly arrived at El Paraiso, I told myself that I could not sleep without making sure—"

"So you've just come up from Paradise Valley?" Storm's powerful fingers beat a tattoo on the arm of his chair. "You must have met Luke Oliver and Ross Haveril. They left here a little while ago on their way to Liberty."

SINCE Valdez had not ridden that road at all and hadn't been near his home, he was at a loss for any answer. Embarked on a minor lie he didn't see clearly which major one to take advantage of.

After his call on Ross Haveril at Secret Valley he had returned to the Mountain House where he had tarried long enough to lose the two hundred dollars which he had in his pocket. Leaving there, he had headed along the old Ridge Trail.

Then from afar, he had heard shots and knew that somewhere on the other trail between the Moutnain House and Lost Valley men were trying to kill one another. Now he learned that the newcomer, Haveril, and Luke Oliver had had a hand in the affair. So soon after he had seen them!

"Well?" said Storm.

Valdez craved pardon. "I am sorry. I was thinking of something. What did you say about Oliver and Haveril?"

"They left here a little while ago. You must have met them. They were going your way, headed for Liberty. Got it? Or shall I say it again?"

"I did meet two men," said Valdez. "Who they were, I don't know. It was quite dark."

"You could not even make out what color their horses were, I suppose?" Storm was grinning fiendishly.

"I did not even think to make out the color of their horses," said Valdez curtly. "Why should I?"

"They were in a wagon!" chuckled Storm. "Damn you, Valdez!" he said hotly. "Why are you so cram-jam full of lies? A man lies the way you do only when he's got a lot to hide! Just let me catch you trying to put anything over and you're done for. Have you got sense enough to know that?"

Valdez, in turn, bristled and his eyes were as hot and angry as Storm's. But he kept his voice as smooth as silk.

"It is never wise to threaten, Mr. Storm. Sometimes it is not only unwise but dangerous."

All this while Bull Strake, standing by the fireplace, had not said a word or moved a muscle. But his intent gaze was always bent upon

the face of the man who spoke, until he had finished, then was boring into the other man.

"You know Strake here," said Storm, passing over Valdez's brittle observation.

Valdez inclined his head perhaps the quarter of an inch.

"I have met Mr. Strake," he admitted.

"Well, you're going to know him a lot better before you are much older," said Storm. "Bull Strake is a friend of mine." Valdez's sleek black brows rose slightly but he said nothing. "Ross Haveril told me part of the story tonight," Storm went on. "Strake, dropping in later, told me a part. If you're wondering why Haveril and Oliver are headed for Liberty in a wagon, here's the ansyer: They are taking Bob Roberts along for his last ride."

"Bob Roberts! What happened?"

"He's dead," said Storm laconically.

"But—"

"Oh, yes, you saw him a little while ago and he was fine, and all that. Can't a man ever kick off without everybody cracking that chestnut? Somebody shot him."

"But who? And where? And why?"

"He butted into another man's fight—"

"Ross Haveril's! He did that before, tonight!"

"Some men followed Luke and Haveril from Black Jack's. They were headed this way, to see me, I suppose. Well, there was a fight pulled off up yonder on High Flats. Bob Roberts chipped in and as far as we know was the only one to get killed."

"I'm sorry about that," murmured Valdez who obviously was not in the least sorry. "But what men followed Oliver and Haveril? And why? Luke hasn't any enemies that I know. Has Haveril made enemies already?"

"Maybe," said Storm. "He makes enemies fast. "Maybe not. The likely thing is it was something else." He turned to Strake. "How about it, Bull? Did Haveril have any money on him?"

Bull Strake shrugged his beefy shoulders. "He made a killing at roulette."

"How much?" asked Storm.

"Over fifty thousand."

"FIFTY THOUSAND," gasped Valdez. "*Caramba*, that's money." But he looked puzzled. "How could he gamble?" he asked. "He had no money—at least, he looked like a tramp!"

"Who gives a damn!" said Storm. "Looted a bank, likely enough. That's the sort he is. But it wasn't just to jaw about Haveril and Luke and Bob Roberts that I told you to stop a minute, Valdez. That's part of it all right, and we'll get back to Ross Haveril in a minute, but first I want some plain talk with you that you won't like very much.

"We're going to say a word or two about a certain mortgage, and if you think you'll feel any better, you can jabber your head off about a man named Willard Hale that a horse of mine killed some few years ago. Then we'll get around to the thing I'm chiefly interested in right now. That is, what became of the snug little fortune that your cute little niece Rita's grandfather left in trust for her?"

"Have you gone crazy then?" gasped Valdez. "I— Before God, Storm, I don't know what you mean!"

"I'll explain," said Storm. He

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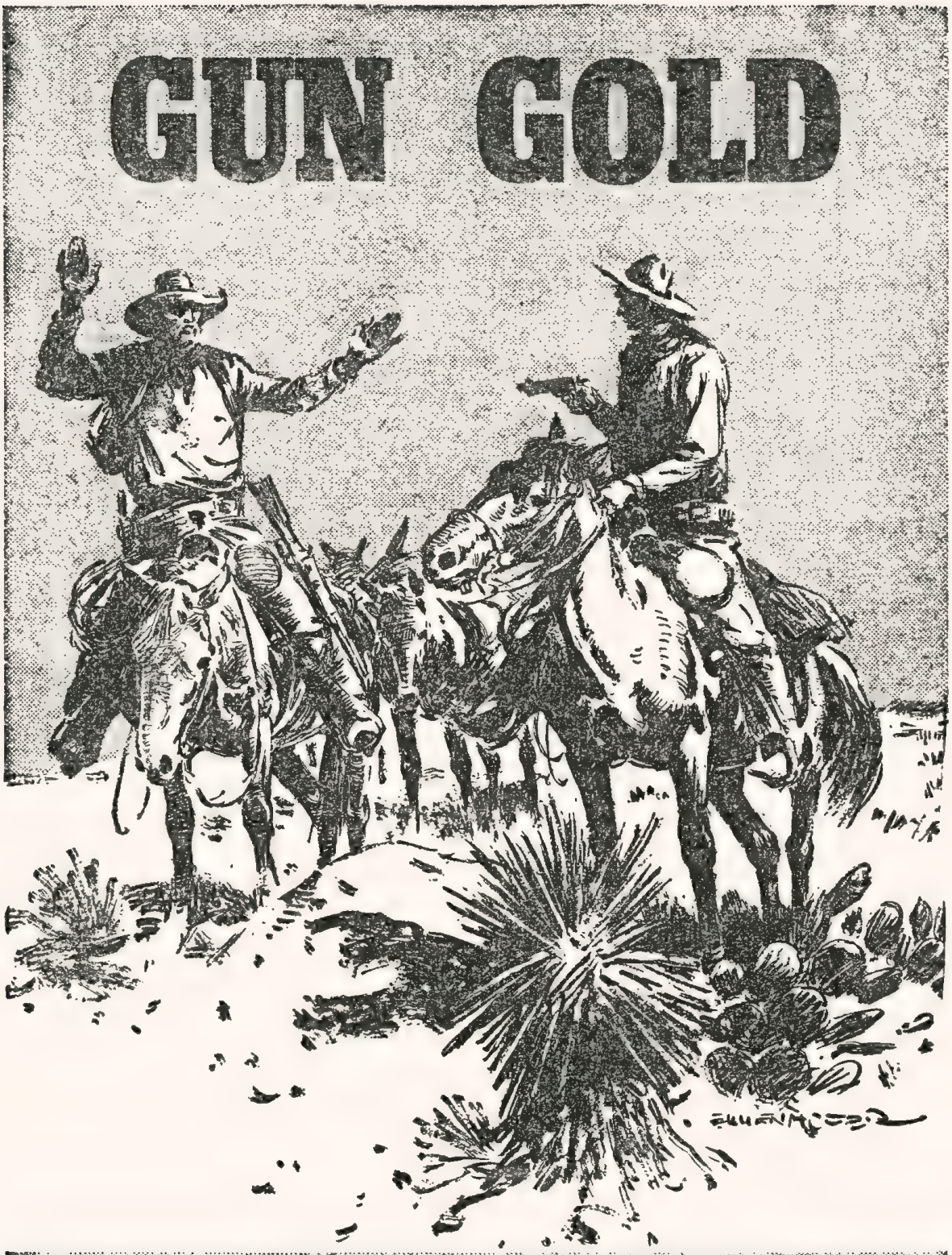
GUN GOLD



by B. BRISTOW GREEN

Gun Gold

GRUNTING at the protest of stiffened muscles, Wade Buckman pushed himself up in bed and threw off the blanket. Swollen eyes popped wide to stare at his legs naked except for a pair of boots.

"Where the heck are my pants!" he yelled.

"Last I seen, a dozen greasers was hangin' onto 'em. That was just before I pulled you out of that ruckus and brung you back across the line," a hard, raspy voice informed him.

Buckman's booted feet hit the floor with a thud as he came erect. His shirt was in rags and one forearm showed a knife cut covered with clotted blood. "What the—" he began, perplexed. Then he stopped.

Seated in a chair tilted against the wall was a tall, gaunt, sun-darkened stranger, a man of about forty with steady, hard eyes and tight lips.

"Seems like you didn't figure the odds when you started your war, young fellow." The stranger's voice sounded like the grating of a rusty hinge.

Buckman frowned. "I don't cotton to a drunk knocking down a woman."

The hard lips curled. "Likely she had it comin' to her. But I like your nerve. I take it you're new to this border country. From your rig, I judge you come from Montana maybe."

Sudden caution checked Buckman's natural friendliness. This fellow didn't miss much. Wyoming was his home range and one reason he had been sent on this job was that he wouldn't be known along the border.

The stranger pitched a bundle on the bed. "Reckon them duds will fit you. You ain't quite as tall as I am, but you got plenty of bone to fill 'em out."

"Obliged," Buckman said, and hurriedly got into underwear, dungarees and flannel shirt. He stood for a moment looking at the still-faced stranger. "I reckon I owe you plenty, mister. Might be I can do something to—"

"You can, especially if you're new to the border. I'm payin' a hundred bucks for a five-day pasear." The hard eyes narrowed shrewdly. "When I first seen you in that Mex dump you was wearin' two guns, so I judge you've smelled powder."

"Some," Buckman admitted dryly. "But I ain't never hired out as a gunhawk."

"Likely there won't be no gunplay, but I reckon you could drag an iron if we run into an argument."

Wade Buckman was no fool. This hard-faced stranger wasn't paying twenty dollars a day unless he expected to get full value for his money. Still, the fellow had undoubtedly saved his life in that wild battle last night, and that was an obligation that couldn't be repudiated. Another reason tipped the balance in Buckman's mind. The man looked like an old-timer in this border country. If he could be made to talk, the five days spent with him might be worth while.

Before Buckman could frame his answer, the man stood up and tossed a silver dollar on the bed. "I reckon them greasers got your money when they ripped the pants off you. Get your breakfast and meet me at the feed lot—unless you change your mind about squarin' for last night's play. The name's Shane Hunter."

He went out, and Buckman stood staring at the closed door, his blue eyes darkening. Decidedly, he did

not like this hombre who traded so cold-bloodedly on the part he had taken in that fight in the cantina.

AFTER he finished dressing, Buckman reached into one boot and smiled as he extracted a flat wad of currency from a concealed pocket. The wolf pack that had torn his clothes off had gotten only the small amount in his pants pocket.

A sudden thought sent his hand diving into his other boot. His chest expanded with a sigh of relief as he straightened. The bit of metal fastened there was safe. The stranger, Shane Hunter, hadn't found it. Or had he—and been smart enough to leave it? Buckman judged not. Hunter might have left that, but not the money when he could have laid the theft to the bunch that had robbed him.

Buckman ran his fingers through his tousled hair, put on his hat and grinned as he picked up the stranger's dollar. "Reckon I'll play the hand as she's dealt," he thought. "But I'll let this Hunter gent think I'm broke."

He found Hunter at the feed lot with five horses, two already saddled. The man had been plenty sure, Buckman thought. "I've got my own horse over there in the shed," he said.

Hunter shook his head. "I pick my own horseflesh for desert work." He handed Buckman a belt with two guns and every loop filled.

Wade buckled on the belt and lifted the guns, two Colt .45s fully loaded. Glancing at the three extra horses, he noticed with considerable curiosity that only one carried a pack. He made no comment on that, but shrugged as he saw the pick, shovels and gold pan topping the load.

"If this here's a prospecting trip, Hunter," he remarked, "you sure picked a tenderfoot for a pardner. I wouldn't know the stuff if I found it."

Hunter made no answer and presently they were riding out of this town of Nogales where the line between the United States and Mexico ran through the main street. It was in the Mexican quarters that Buckman had so nearly lost his life the night before.

Once out of the town, they turned south, jogging along side by side. The three extra horses trailed along as though they were accustomed to following the two saddle horses.

Since they left the corral, Shane Hunter had not spoken a word. He rode silently alert, his pale agate eyes shifting constantly over the hot desert sands.

At noon, with some fifteen miles behind them, they stopped at a waterhole. Hunter took a package of food from a saddle pocket and divided it with Buckman.

"We'll have more time to eat tonight," he said briefly. He wolfed his food and picked up the lead ropes of the two unloaded horses. "Wait here," he ordered, and rode off into the sand dunes.

When he returned, the two horses, to Buckman's amazement, were heavily loaded, their packs carefully covered with canvas. Whatever those packs contained, Hunter must have hidden out here in the desert. He offered no explanation, and Buckman knew it would be useless to question him. In a few moments they were again slogging south.

FOR a long time they rode without talking. "Where are these gold diggin's you're headin' for?" Buckman asked finally. He hardly expected an answer, but the

man's dogged silence was edging his nerves.

"Down on the Agua Cantanda," Hunter grunted laconically.

Encouraged, Wade tried again. "Never heard of it. Right pretty name. What does it spell in plain American talk?"

"Means Singin' Water, but don't let that fool you none. It's been the death song for more'n one white man."

Silence again fell while they bored steadily on under the blistering sun. There was no trail, but Shane Hunter seemed to know very definitely where he was going. When the sun was less than an hour high, he put the horses to a trot. It was quite dark when they pulled up at a waterhole.

"This here little pasear, Buckman," Hunter said in a raspy, unpleasant tone, "you're gettin' paid for it, twenty dollars a day—no more. It ain't a pardnership deal."

Buckman grunted as he slid from the saddle. He felt as though he was cooked to the marrow, but neither Hunter nor the horses seemed much distressed. An unwilling admiration stirred in him. They had come a good forty miles through country that would have killed his Wyoming-bred horse. This hard-bitten desert man knew his business.

Buckman dragged the saddle from his horse and watered him. Then he dropped the reins and started toward the pack animals. Hunter swung around quickly and pointed to the one whose pack was topped by the pick, shovels and gold pan.

"The chuck and grain's in that pack. I'll look after the others while you throw a bait together."

The sharpness of his tone stung Buckman, but he curbed his temper. There must be a reason why he, drawing twenty dollars a day, was being given the short end of the work.

Picketing the saddle horses near the waterhole, Hunter led the two loaded animals off through the sand dunes and disappeared. Buckman had supper ready when he returned leading the two horses minus their packs.

Hunter filled nosebags with grain and put them on the horses. After that he came to the fire and helped himself to food. They ate in silence. Hunter smoked one pipe of tobacco, stretched out on the sand with his rifle and six-guns beside him, and went to sleep. After a while the fire died down and black night blanketed the desert with only the steely glitter of the distant stars to relieve the darkness.

With his head pillowed on his saddle, Wade Buckman puzzled over the situation in which he found himself. This was no prospecting trip, he was certain. Five days was not time enough for such business, and Shane Hunter would not have picked a green hand for a mining venture. In spite of the fact that Hunter had said there would probably be no gunplay, Wade knew that he had been chosen for his six feet of hard bone and lean muscle. Hunter either knew or suspected that there was trouble ahead.

And why had Hunter taken the trouble to hide those packs? What did they contain? Buckman grinned up at the stars. "It would be plumb funny if gettin' throwed out of a Mex cantina landed me on a hot trail." With that thought he went to sleep.

It was still dark, but near morning, when he woke to see Hunter leading two of the pack animals away. He had breakfast ready by the time the man returned with both animals packed again. When break-

fast was eaten, Hunter hung a full water bag on each of the horses and handed Buckman an extra canteen.

"We got fourteen hours' dry ridin'," he explained. Then he added: "I judge your rifle's loaded."

Daylight seemed to bring a subtle change in the man. He rode a little straighter in the saddle, and his hard eyes were even more alert. Once he stopped to change the order of the trailing pack animals. He put the one Buckman had packed in the rear.

"Get behind them horses," he ordered briefly. "When I speed up, shove 'em along."

The rearrangement put the horse with whose load Wade was familiar between him and the two with the mysterious packs. He didn't miss the point, but at least Hunter was up front, and he was glad of that.

"Fourteen hours' steady with that mummy would have me doin' a cock-eyed shirt-tail dance through them cactus patches. He's about as sociable as a blind rattler," Buckman thought.

For the most part, they followed the beds of dry washes or threaded between the sand ridges. Whenever they were forced to the higher ground, Hunter covered it at a trot. Frequently he twisted in the saddle to scan the desert on every side.

All day long they kept it up, with only one stop to water the horses. Hour by hour a range of mountains to the southeast loomed closer. By four o'clock they were near enough for Buckman to make out details. Bushes covered the lower slopes and forests darkened the upper reaches. There were canyons that gave promise of shade and water.

"I'd shore appreciate a taste of this here Singin' Water Mr. Hunter has been sheddin' so much conversation about," he reflected.

BEHIND an unusually high outcrop of rock, Hunter slid from the saddle and climbed to the top. He was back in a few moments and they rode on hurriedly. Buckman looked back and saw a slender column of black smoke rising straight up from the top of the ridge.

"Signal!" he thought. "Somethin's about to break."

Close ahead, the mountains rose sharply from the desert floor without the foothills that Buckman was accustomed to in the northern country. He nudged his horse up alongside of Hunter. "This here Singin' Water you're headin' for, you figure to make camp there tonight?"

Shane Hunter didn't answer. He had pulled up and was looking southward along the foot of the mountains. "Get set for trouble, fellow!" His voice was flat as he loosened his six-gun and pulled his rifle from the boot.

A quarter of a mile away seven riders were coming at a trot. "This," Buckman reflected, "is what I'm being paid twenty dollars a day for." He pulled out his rifle and laid it across his saddle. "What do you make of 'em?" he asked.

"Rurales," growled Hunter. "Damn 'em!"

There were six troopers and an officer, a clear-eyed young fellow with a frank smile that Buckman liked.

"Buenas tardes, señores," the officer called pleasantly, halting his men and coming on alone.

Buckman grinned back at him, but Hunter sat silent and tight-lipped. The officer's eyes ran over the pack animals and stopped briefly on the one carrying the mining tools.

"It is the gold you seek in our country, amigos?" he said, still smiling. "You have the *permiso* that is required?"

"Sure," Hunter growled, fishing a paper from his pocket.

That jolted Buckman. Maybe the suspicion that had been growing in his mind was unfounded. But the grim set of Hunter's lips disturbed him.

The officer handed back the paper. "It is correct, señor. But thees pack train—it is my duty to make sure there is not the smuggle goods."

Shane Hunter spun his horse in front of the man. One hand dipped and came up with a leveled Colt.

"Keep away from the packs, greaser!" he warned. There was a wicked twist to his lips. "Buckman," he snapped without turning his head, "drop the first man that moves. We're trailin' out of this." He jabbed the six-gun back into its holster, snapped up his rifle and backed his horse toward the head of the pack train.

It caught the seven men unprepared, and Buckman reluctantly covered them while he kneed his mount in behind the last pack horse. He didn't like this business. These men represented the law, and he had respect for the law in any country. Anyway, it wouldn't work, he was sure of that; not with the odds seven to two. Hunter was a fool to try it.

Then, with cocked rifles leveled, they had the pack animals moving along the line of dazed soldiers toward a deep draw. For a moment Buckman had hopes that they might get away with the play without a killing. Then his nerves snapped tight as he caught a faint drumming sound, the swift beat of hoofs in soft sand. "More soldiers!" he thought grimly. "This here's the payoff."

The soldiers heard it, too, and one of them suddenly jerked up his rifle. Buckman's shot dropped the horse, pinning the man under it. "That tears it," he muttered. But Hunter was heading straight toward the growing rumble as though he had not heard it.

The next moment a horde of bareback riders swept out of the draw. They were bareheaded, dusky, savage-faced men who swarmed over the soldiers like a flood. "Indians!" was the thought that flashed into Buckman's mind, and he urged the pack horses to a run.

From behind came the blast of guns and the screams of dying men. "And it'll be our turn next," Buckman thought as they raced into the draw. They were a hundred yards along it when the sounds of battle suddenly died.

SHANE HUNTER pulled up, twisted in the saddle and looked back at him. "Well, we made it," he said, and for the first time there was a smile on his hard mouth, a crooked, unpleasant grin. "Them Yaquis will make a clean job of it."

Then, with a rush, the Indians were back again, ringing the two white men and the pack train in a close circle. Yaquis! Buckman's back crawled. The most ruthless and savage of all Indians. But Shane Hunter was sitting his horse calmly and shaping a cigarette. When he had it lighted he rode toward a shriveled old Indian who moved out to meet him. They talked in a jargon Buckman couldn't understand.

The old Indian turned and grunted a command that set the band tearing open the packs Hunter had guarded so jealously. Now he offered no protest, and Buckman's suspicions were confirmed. In a few minutes fifty rifles with plenty of ammunition were laid on the ground before the chief. Shane Hunter was running guns to the Yaqui nation, and the only men who could have

done anything about it lay dead back on the desert.

Buckman was thinking grimly of those dead men when a stealthy sound made him wheel, but too late. An Indian snatched his rifle and another the six-guns from his holsters. His hands flashed to the empty holsters, but stopped as Hunter said, "Take it easy, fellow, we're going into the hills to collect," and handed his own weapons to the chief.

One of the Indians tied a bandage over Hunter's eyes. When another did the same for Buckman he made no resistance. This was Hunter's game, and he evidently knew the reason for the move. A moment later they were riding with the soft scuff of horses' hoofs around them.

They rode for a long time following a steeply rising trail. There was the smell of trees and the coolness of the night breeze. Then they were moving down some precipitous trail where the horses' hoofs clicked on bare rock. Buckman caught the sound of running water, and then they stopped.

Buckman sat still, waiting the next move, but there was only the swift beat of retreating hoofs and then silence. It was broken by Hunter's voice, saying, "All right, Buckman. You can take off your blinders." He had already gotten rid of his own bandage when Buckman freed his eyes. The Indians had vanished.

A full moon showed towering peaks hemming them in on all sides. Except for the singing murmur of the water, the place was utterly still. Hunter pointed to the stream, silvery white in the moonlight.

"Agua Cantanda," he said. "No white man ever came in here with his eyes open and lived to tell it."

"Why?" Buckman asked.

Hunter swung from the saddle. "You'll find out in the morning," he said, and there was an eagerness in his voice that Buckman had not heard before.

When Buckman stepped from his horse his feet sank in sand that seemed as yellow as gold in the moonlight. They unpacked the one horse the Indians hadn't touched and cooked supper. While they ate, Buckman's eyes searched the deep shadows of the forested slopes. He had the feeling that they were being watched, and he wondered why.

But Hunter's eyes were on the stream. Once he turned quickly and spoke with the old savage harshness in his voice. "Remember, I'm payin' you a hundred bucks. That's all you get."

"The hell with you!" Buckman muttered, and lay down with his back to Hunter. The Indians had disarmed them both, and he felt safe enough.

Movement wakened him before daylight. "Get breakfast," Hunter ordered brusquely, and picked up the gold pan and a shovel.

He went down to the stream, dropped the tools, and placed two open leather pouches on the bank close to them. He stood for a moment looking up at the tallest peak on the west rim of the basin before he came back.

By the time they had eaten, morning light colored the sky. Hunter went back to the stream. He stood there tensely erect, his big hands clenched, his eyes fixed on that western peak. Deeply curious, Buckman watched the peak. The first flash of sunlight struck it, and instantly Hunter leaped into the stream, snatched the shovel and began to dig.

He worked with almost superhuman energy, filling the pan, washing out the sand and dumping gold

into one of the pouches. Buckman began to understand the setup. In exchange for those rifles, Hunter had some arrangement with the Yaquis to pan gold from this basin. Buckman picked up the other shovel and started toward the stream.

HUNTER looked up, his eyes glittering. "Drop that shovel, you fool, unless you want an Indian's bullet through your skull! I brought that extra shovel in case I broke one." He scraped a teaspoon of gold into the pouch and caught up his shovel. "All I get is what one man can wash out between sunup and sunset in one day." And again he fell to work furiously.

Buckman had seen men working placer ground that was supposed to be rich, but never anything like this. Through the ages, gold had been accumulating in this basin until it was a treasure house. No wonder men risked their lives to find the Singing Water.

Noon came and Hunter refused to stop even to eat. When evening came he worked with greater fury, glancing quickly up at a white peak to the east. When the last gleam of sunlight died there a shot cracked out on the timbered slope. Hunter dropped the shovel and crawled up the bank. In his two pouches, Buckman judged, there must be twelve or fifteen pounds of gold.

Once while Hunter wolfed food he turned hot, red-rimmed eyes toward Buckman. "You get the hundred bucks, fellow—no more," he reminded.

Buckman's temper flared. "I don't want your damned gold, Hunter. Get that straight. Bring it up again and I'll beat your face in."

Hunter snarled but made no reply. "Pack the grub on the horse," he said when they were through eating. "Never mind the rest of the stuff. We're moving."

While Buckman packed, the Indians drifted in, coming out of the dark as soundlessly as ghosts. Again he and Hunter were blindfolded, and presently they were riding up some secret trail.

It was past midnight when they halted. Buckman snatched off his blindfold as the sound of the departing Indians died away. Hunter was dismounting.

"We bush here," he said. On one of the pack animals hung their rifles and side guns. Hunter's face was drawn with weariness. He stretched out on the sands with his guns beside him and was soon asleep.

Buckman made sure his guns were loaded before he lay down. Once his fingers slipped into a boot top to feel the bit of metal there. Two days to get back across the border—if he was lucky enough to get back. When he went to sleep he lay facing Hunter with one hand on a gun butt.

The continuous snarls of fighting coyotes disturbed him through the night, and he wondered what held them so close to camp. At dawn he found out. The camp was close to where the Indians had swarmed over the rurales.

When they broke camp, Buckman rode over to the place. He hated the thought of that boyish, friendly young officer being dead. Maybe some of them had escaped. But there on the sand he counted seven bodies and what he saw turned his stomach. The Yaquis had done a thorough job on their victims. Buckman's face was set in hard lines when he rejoined Hunter.

When they were riding north again, Hunter looked across at him. "'Pears you didn't like what you seen back there," he said with an

unpleasant grin. "Them Yaquis shore know how to polish off a greaser when they get a chance."

The brutal indifference of it stung Buckman. "It was your damned signal smoke that brought the Indians," he declared hotly. "You murdered those men."

A leather harness held the two bags of gold to Hunter's back so that his hands were free to reach for his guns. The possession of the gold made him more cheerful, but not any more friendly. He laughed in Buckman's face.

"Sure, I signaled them Yaquis," he admitted. "I knowed we might meet up with rurales. This ain't the first lot of guns I've run in."

Buckman's lips curled. "A man that'll use Indians to do his killing is sure the lowest kind of coyote! I'll be plumb glad when we cross the line and I see the last of you."

"Yeah?" Hunter asked cynically. "Maybe you'll wish you had some more of them Yaquis around before we make the line. There's bandits in this country that's worse'n Indians."

But Buckman was thinking that bandits did not constitute the greatest menace for him on his back trail. Shane Hunter had made similar trips. With the promise of a hundred dollars he had lured other men to back him against the dangers of the desert. It was not likely he had allowed those men to return with the knowledge of his secret. His own life would be safe only until they were close enough to the border to be past the danger of bandits.

They made camp at dusk. Twice during the night Buckman rose and shifted his bedground. At dawn they were pushing ahead rapidly. For hours there was no talk. The silence grew brittle as the watchful tension built up between them.

At noon they made the waterhole fifteen miles out of Nogales. They stopped briefly and then pressed on. Hunter lagged, as though trying to force Buckman out in front. Each time Buckman fell back even with him. They were still some miles from Nogales when Hunter took to resting his rifle across his saddle. Once, while Hunter built a cigarette, Buckman found the rifle muzzle pointing straight at him.

Buckman reined in. "Hunter, keep that rifle pointed the other way or I'll take it away from you," he warned. For reasons of his own, he had not wanted a showdown this side of the line, but a quick decision sent his hand to a gun butt. "I got an idea you're figuring to murder me. Damn you, reach!" He half expected the rifle to swing toward him. What happened caught him by surprise.

Hunter's jaw sagged, the rifle slid to the ground and he lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender. But with the same motion he swung his leg over the saddle and dropped behind his horse.

"You got the idea, fellow," he snarled. "Only you got it too late."

But Wade Buckman caught the trick. His horse leaped under a jab of the spurs as Hunter's six-gun blasted. The bullet whizzed by his shoulder. It flashed through his mind that this was the finish for him. But Hunter's horse reared at the gun blast and for an instant blocked his aim.

Hunter leaped clear and snapped a shot that grazed Buckman's ribs as he wheeled and charged back. A third bullet raked his collar bone before his own gun crashed. Shane Hunter's gaunt form stretched to its full height, hung poised for a second, and then crumpled face down. He did not move again.

Buckman waited warily for a moment before he stepped down. He turned the lifeless body over and looked down into the hard face. "I sure figured on a different finish," he muttered, and then his shoulders lifted and fell. "But I reckon it just had to be this way."

He tied Hunter's body, with the two bags of gold still on his back, across his horse and headed for town. An hour later, north of the line in Nogales, the sheriff was looking at him across the dead man laid out on a table.

"Who are you, mister?" the officer asked. "And how come you fetch old Shane Hunter in from the desert with a bullet through his heart?"

Buckman reached into one boot top and brought out the bit of metal hidden there.

"The name's Wade Buckman," he said, laying the badge on the table. "United States deputy marshal, sent here to bust up gun runnin' across the border." He glanced down at Hunter's gaunt face. "I judge my job's finished," he added, and told his story of the trip to the valley of Singing Waters.

The sheriff frowned as Buckman finished. "Shane Hunter made five trips south in the last six months, to my knowledge, but he never had any guns on his pack animals when he left here."

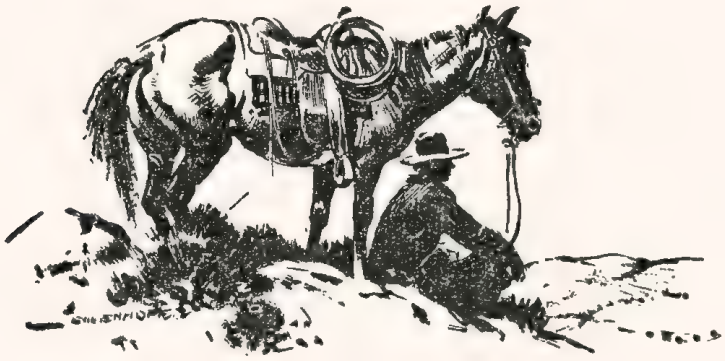
Buckman shrugged. "He wouldn't. He was too foxy for that. Likely he collected his guns a few at a time and cached 'em out at the first waterhole, like he done this time. It was easy to pick 'em up there. Five trips, you say. Did he ever go alone?"

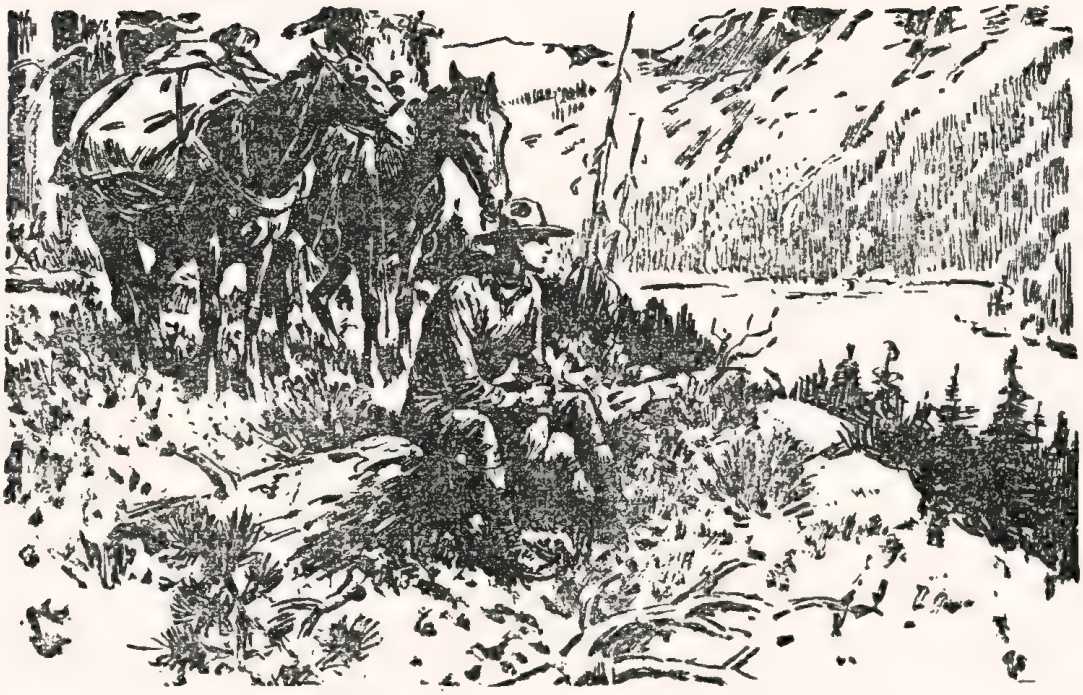
The sheriff rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Always had a man with him. None of 'em ever came back. He said he paid 'em off out in the hills."

"Yes," Buckman said thoughtfully, "paid 'em like he tried to pay me—with lead."

He picked up the two sacks of gold. "Hunter's dead, so there won't be no trial," he declared. "I'm headin' back into Mexico to locate the families of them rurales Hunter's Yaquis murdered. I reckon they can use this stuff from the Singing Waters—Shane Hunter's gun gold."

THE END.





WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

People interested in exploring the Great Smokies and the State of Tennessee, are invited to write John North for further information. He will tell you where you may get free maps and descriptive literature about the State.

ONE of our readers, Weldon Stout, writes: "Can you tell me something about the Tennessee Mountains we hear so much about in song and story, and also about the Tennessee Valley? I understand it is very picturesque and makes a nice vacation spot to visit."

It *is* a nice vacation spot, Weldon, and it is a mighty interesting neighborhood to visit. From your letter, I gather you would be most interested in that section referred to as the Upper Tennessee Valley. Here is a section where you will find the most modern improvements side by side with conditions as primitive as they were a hundred or more years ago.

If you go to Knoxville, in the heart of that district, you are in a modern industrial city. Then, an hour's drive out of the city takes you back into the age of the coonskin cap and the long rifle.

Naturally, you have read of the gigantic irrigation projects of the Tennesee Valley Authority, so one of the first things you must see is Norris Dam, twenty miles out of Knoxville.

This dam brings visitors from all over the country, and is well worth seeing. It is two hundred and sixty-five feet high and over eighteen hundred feet long. The water back of this huge concrete structure forms Norris Lake.

Aside from their other interests, Norris Lake and Norris Park offer plenty of fun to the fisherman and sportsman. The park is run by the T. V. A. for the benefit of the public, and there you can wade knee-deep in almost every kind of sport you enjoy, such as fishing, swimming, boating, hiking, riding, et cetera.

After you've had enough of that neighborhood, I suggest that you drive up to Cumberland Gap on U. S. Highway 25E. It is on the intersection line between Tennessee, Virginia and Kentucky. This is a fine road leading to the place where Daniel Boone passed through the Gap in 1775, marking out the famous historical old Wilderness Road.

Still working out of Knoxville, turn northeast for a short distance on U. S. Highway 11W to the Buffalo Springs Game Farm, a State institution. All kinds of wild game for restocking the mountains, prairies and streams are raised here, and it is a place of unusual beauty.

Another scenic wonder you should not miss is Indian Cave, one of the wonder spots of this State of wonders. The Indians once used the cave, and evidence of their council fires is still to be seen on the smoke-blackened ceilings. No cave in the United States, at least none that can be explored by the traveler, offers as many queer formations.

In the travertine deposits nature has created thousand of stalactites and stalagmites, great masses of stone, hanging like icicles from the ceiling and standing up sharply from the floors, and these crystalline formations take on strange colorings and shapes, like fancy draperies made of delicately colored snow. An underground stream flows the entire length of the cave and empties into the Holston River at the entrance.

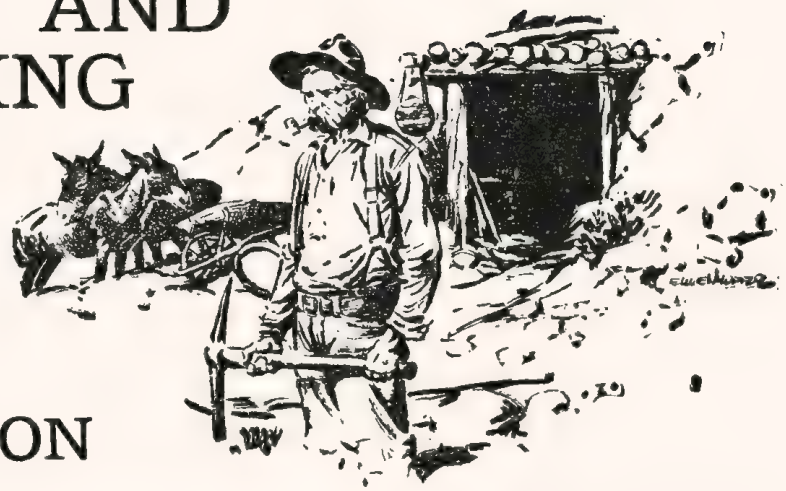
Of course, you must arrange to see the Great Smokies, now a national park, because this vast range of mountains, with its half-million-acre park and its mile-high peaks always shrouded in smoky haze, is the outstanding sight east of the Rockies. This great Eastern playground, where there are so many things to see and so many trails to explore, should be part of the itinerary of everybody who has a car and lives in the East. It is worth all the effort you have to make to get to see it. The Great Smokies are open the year round now, for the government keeps the snow cleared out in the winter time.

You can drive into the mountains without equipment and stay as long as you want, for there are camps, places to pitch your own tent, or to rent gear, cabins and lodges. The only trouble is that you will never want to come out of this vacation spot and go back to work again.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

MINES AND MINING



By

J. A. THOMPSON

GOLD mining in Calaveras County, that bonanza-rich Mark Twain country down in the southern part of California's famous Mother Lode region, goes on and on. Profitably, too. Mines and gold prospects are scattered all over the face of the county. Prospectors, sluices boxes, and mine dumps dot the landscape.

In spite of the fact that the region has been producing gold in quantity for virtually a hundred years, a lot of the old properties are still being worked, and new ones are being opened up right along. Get out there among those rich old gold camps—Mokelumne Hill, San Andreas, Altaville, Angels Camp, Carson Hill and Melones—and you will find all kinds of gold mining in progress. Individuals panning or running sluice boxes in the old bonanza channels, gleaning their beans and bacon and now and then striking a small patch of virgin ground overlooked by the old-timers which may net them a couple of hundred dollars in a week's time. Larger outfits run drag-lines to win their placer gold, or dredge for it.

Lode mines are everywhere—active, abandoned, or just getting started. It used to be grand pocket-hunting country. But the day of that adventurous form of mining gamble is perhaps definitely on the wane. Surface and near-surface ores have been pretty well exhausted. And it was in them that the pocket-hunter had a chance to bet his time and a few rounds of dynamite that he could blow himself a pocket of picture ore out of the spotty rock and irregular, pinched veins that disappeared and reappeared with the apparent magic of a man pulling rabbits out of an empty hat.

Nevertheless, pocket-hunters still try, and last year across the Stanislaus River over in Tuolumne County Charley Gillis and two partners decided to work an old, shallow shaft on Jackass Hill. Along about mid-afternoon they broke into a pocket of gold ore out of which they took some $2,000 before nightfall. The next day they took another $2,000 out of the same pocket, and a lot of the rich specimens, quartz with clumps of solid gold clinging to them, were probably worth a good deal more than their actual monetary value as museum pieces.

Charley hit a jackpot. A lot of others didn't. It would be ridiculous

to say that that was the last bonanza pocket in the region. But just remember if your urge is to pocket-hunt that you are gambling on success. The stakes are high to be sure. And win or lose the game is thrilling—if you can afford to bet your grubstake. Pocket-hunting is not like beans and bacon placering. There is no steady small amount to be won each day to help carry you along until a richer stretch of pay-streak is uncovered.

That, we think, answers the queries in J. L.'s recent letter from New Orleans, Louisiana. "I am intending a prospecting trip to the West early this spring," he writes, "and in spite of the fact that it is old gold country and has probably been gone over a hundred times, the Mother Lode section of California attracts me strongly, particularly the southern sector around Calaveras County. It has a big appeal from a historic point of view, but I would also like to know if much mining is still being done there. How about individual placer mining? And pocket-hunting? What is the story on that?"

We lead off with the story, J. L. As for a little additional data, you will find perhaps a thousand small scale placer miners scattered around the creeks and rivers. Mostly they work in early spring and during parts of the winter when the water is high.

Another angle to prospecting in Calaveras County is the revival, in many cases successfully, of drift mining, that is, digging down onto the ancient buried-up rich river channels and hauling the placer gravel thus found up to the surface for washing. It is probably in these as yet only partially explored old stream channel gravels that some of the richest placer gold reserves exist, not only in Calaveras County but in other California placer gold regions as well.

In Calaveras County alone, while the actual drift mining reserves has not been too accurately determined —it can't be until the buried channels have been better explored —the rough figure experts have given as the possible amount of still unmined gold they contain is very high —probably $100,000,000.

Two of these rich ancient gold-carrying drainage systems cut through Calaveras County. The old, long since buried Calaveras River channel which in past prehistoric geological ages crossed the canyon of the North Fork of the Stanislaus into Calaveras County three and one-half miles east of Douglas Flat and runs westerly to Altaville, then northwest through San Andreas to Central Hill. The other buried channel, the Cataract, also crosses the North Fork of the Stanislaus into Calaveras County and follows the west bank to Parrot Ferry, then swings across the river again in Tuolumne County edging back into Calaveras five miles above Knights Ferry for a few miles.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS

THE first letter we've published this week was accompanied by another one when it came to us, and we decided to use it as a sort of introduction. Mrs. Synek, who sent us these letters, is back with us again after seventeen years! Yes, she joined the Ol' Holla way back in 1921 and had some of the most wonderful letter friends until illness and other troubles interfered and she had to stop writing to them. She goes on to say, ". . . but I have never forgotten them, and now that my life is a little more settled I would like so much to get in touch with them again, but I'll need your help, Miss Rivers, because I lost their names and addresses in a fire several years ago. Now, do you think if you were to drop my other letter in the Hollow Tree that some of these old friends might see it and write to me? It might also bring me some new friends as nice as my old friends, too, don't you think?" We're glad to say, "Welcome back" to this old friend of ours, and here's her other letter—

Dear Miss Rivers:
This is an S O S to my old Hollow Tree letter friends of 1921 and 1922. Please, old friends, if you see this, won't you write to me? I've missed your letters so much. Your names and addresses were lost in a fire and I have no way of getting in touch with you unless you write to me first. But besides hearing from my old Pen Pals, I would like some new ones, any age from anywhere in the United States and from all foreign countries—only members of the feminine sex, though. I am forty-three years old and married. Collecting snapshots is my hobby and I will exchange some of Omaha and vicinity for some of yours. I'll answer all letters.—Mrs. Amanda Synek, 1105 William Street, Omaha, Nebraska

Serious-minded people are welcome here—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a young man thirty-four years old, married and the father of three children. My hobby is collecting stamps, and I'd like to make some friends all over the world to exchange with. Write one and all, but serious-minded people are most welcome. I'll answer all letters and send a snap of myself to all who heed my call.—George L. Kilpatrick, 1A Barrington Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Send Euella your snapshot—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Here is an old friend from South Carolina looking for some Pen Pals. I am a lonely girl and would like to get lots of letters from all over the world. My hobby is collecting snapshots, and I will exchange them with all who answer.—Euella McCoy Anderson, c/o LeRoy Crawford, Route No. 2, Anderson, South Carolina

Jack has covered some territory—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am thirty-two years old and would like to hear from everybody who can read and write. During my lifetime I have had my share of adventure. I have been a cowboy, a miner, a pilot, and have served in the United States navy and coast guard service and sailed on some merchant ships. I have been in thirteen foreign countries and speak German, Italian, Spanish and English fluently. I am just back from Alaska after seven years spent up above the circle. So come on, everybody, let's hear from you.—Jack C. Sherwood, c/o Rock Creek Inn, Bishop, California

She'll be a worthy Pen Pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Could you find room in your Hollow Tree for my letter? I am fifteen years old and live on the edge of the sand hills in Nebraska. I get pretty lonesome and so I would like someone my age to write to. I enjoy all outdoor sports, especially horseback riding and hiking, and as a hobby collect cowboy songs. I also play the

harmonica. I promise to be a worthy Pen Pal to all who write, and whether you live in the East or West you'll be welcome.—Genevieve Walker, Route No. 1, Petersburg, Nebraska

Drop a letter to this lonely boy in far-off Africa—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Will you be so kind as to get a lonely South African youth a few Pen Pals in this wide world of ours? I am seventeen years old, and my hobbies are stamp collecting and corresponding with Pen Pals from overseas. Boys and girls are welcome, and I will answer any questions concerning South Africa.—Norman Reeder, Klipfontein Road, Elsie's River, North Cape Town, South Africa

Dorothy is a football fan—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am sixteen years old and would like to have Pen Pals from all over the world—the more the better. I enjoy all sports and am an ardent football fan. My hobbies are collecting snapshots, which I also develop and print, and match folders. Come on, boys and girls of any age, write to me; I promise to answer all letters promptly. —Dorothy M. Chaplic, 54 Spring Street, Brookville, Massachusetts

This CCC boy will answer promptly—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a lonesome CCC boy looking for some Pen Pals who'll drop me a few lines. I have been in the CCC for fourteen months and can tell you lots about it. I would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the United States between eighteen and twenty years old. I will exchange photos with anyone who writes, and will sign off now, hoping I get some letters, which I will answer promptly.—Tom Welch, CCC Camp, Box 101, Whitewater, New Mexico

A marine sends this S O S—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a United States marine stationed here in Shanghai, China, and it sure gets lonesome at times. I would like to hear from girls and boys, young or old, and will answer all letters and exchange snaps. Please send me your pictures when you write.—Charles H. Pendleton, Fourth Regiment, M. T. Co., U. S. M. C., Shanghai, China

Andrew has thrown out his anchor and is waiting for some letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am thirty years old, and now, after traveling extensively, I finally have a position which leaves me anchored in one spot. I'm still pretty much of a stranger here, and have plenty of time to correspond, so come on, everybody, and drop me a line.—Andrew Docasey, 21 Barnes Street, Ashley, Pennsylvania

"Tiny" has three thousand stamps in his collection!

Dear Miss Rivers:
This is my first letter to the Old Holla, but I have been corresponding and trading stamps with several Pen Pals. It is only in the last few months that I have started collecting stamps. I now have more than three thousand, although a great many of them are duplicates, and am appealing to all you Pen Pals who also collect stamps. I am an ex-Canadian soldier, thirty-nine years old, six feet three inches tall, and my nickname is Tiny—a carry-over from my football days. I have been living in the United States for two years, and during that time have traveled in twenty-two of them. I will answer all letters from anywhere and everywhere.—J. A. Guthrie, 201 East Ferry Street, Detroit, Michigan

GET THIS FREE

PICTURE OF THE MONTH

Here's your opportunity to obtain FREE a series of colorful framing reproductions of striking *Western Story* covers. Simply fill out and send in together FOUR coupons, each clipped from consecutive issues of *Western Story Magazine*. The Picture of the Month for your latest coupon will be sent. Start now! Clip this coupon and save for your handsome **Picture of the Month** collection.

EDITOR, WESTERN STORY
79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Name..... Age.....

Address.....Feb. 11th issue

Here are the names of the stories I liked best in this issue:

First..... Third.....

Second..... Fourth.....

PRESTO! ANYONE CAN MASTER GLAZE

LEAVES HARD GLASS-LIKE FINISH

SEALS THE PORES OF THE SURFACE

EASY TO APPLY

PROTECTS THE SURFACE

WILL NOT FINGER-MARK

NO OILY FILM AS WITH POLISH

EASY TO KEEP CLEAN

NO SMEAR OR STREAKS AS WITH WAX

LASTS SIX MONTHS TO A YEAR

SAVES YOU MONEY

It's Different! AMAZING NEW GLAZE BEAUTIFIES and PROTECTS

CAR Owners! Meet MASTER GLAZE—the sensationally different luster for new and used cars!

Not a wax—not an oil polish—not a paint—nothing that "smears" over the surface. It's a creamy liquid—quick and easy to apply. A matchbox full is enough to glaze an entire car! Enables every motorist to keep his car finish sparkling—beautiful as a showroom car. Also amazingly restores gleaming luster to dull weather-beaten cars. Gives a hard glass-life surface without smear or streaks! Nothing like it!

Millions of motorists have the problem of keeping their cars looking new. They all want gleaming, shiny, streak-free appearance without hard work and rubbing. Now with this new and different Master Glaze method, anyone can quickly and easily Master Glaze his car, obtaining sparkling brilliance, with a beautiful, smooth, mirror-like surface.

Master Glaze is so durable—so protective to the surface—that even washing with gasoline does not affect its brilliant luster. Lasts six months to a year!

Car Owners Praise MASTER GLAZE

I have used a great many polishes, and waxes, but will say Master Glaze is the winner. Clarence Gray, Calif.

IT LOOKS SWELL

Master Glaze is the best I have ever used and is put on the easiest. I glazed my car last Sunday, and boy!—does it look swell. Lewis Thompson, Ill.

STANDS THE TEST

Master Glaze has been put to the test here directly in front of the Atlantic, where the salt spray with the fine beach sand, including road dirt, form a heavy film on paint. Your Cleaner lifted the film and brought back the original shine. H. M. Chambers, N. J.

LONG LASTING

Used Master Glaze on my car last summer. It stood up all winter in good shape. Now my friends are asking about it, so will sell. A. Stonis, Ill.

SELLS 8 IN HOUR

Master Glazed a car on a demonstration in the parking lot and sold eight sets within one hour. I am delighted with it as a fine product and as a good seller. Edmund M. Blanken, Pa.

VERY MUCH PLEASED

Received shipment of 96 sets and have been very much pleased with the way it sells. It out-demonstrates any and every type of cleaner and polish I have seen. Dave Jones, Mont.

It's Fun To MASTER GLAZE

It's really a pleasure to Master Glaze. You almost feel like a magician when you see the quickness and ease with which you can transform your car into a thing of gleaming beauty. New cars and good paint jobs are entitled to this protection—old cars with dull paint almost instantly look like different cars. No experience is required. Even a child can Master Glaze.

New Car Beauty SAVES YOU MONEY

Master Glaze glorifies the beauty of your car, protects the finish, and saves you money. Less washing, less polishing, less work. You will have a more beautiful car to drive, and a car whose resale value will always be more. You owe it to yourself and to your car to find out about Master Glaze. Send your name for free booklet and free trial offer.

AGENTS - Write for Big Profit and Free Offer Plan

Choice territories open. You can make big money taking care of local business and get Master Glaze for your own car free by helping introduce it. Don't delay. Send the free offer coupon today!

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Gentlemen: Please send your FREE illustrated booklet and tell me how I can get Master Glaze for my own car FREE. This does not obligate me in any way.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

MISSING DEPARTMENT

ROIG, HERBERT—He is thirty-seven years old, five feet, ten inches tall, weighs one hundred and fifty pounds and has gray eyes and brown hair. He was born in Fort Worth, Texas, and was last heard of in 1928 when he was living in the Marquette Apartments, 965 Geary Street, San Francisco, California. He may be working for a railroad or steamship company. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please notify me, Stanley Jones, 1146 Webster Street, San Francisco, California.

CUROTOLA, DR. MARIO—He was a student at Polyclinic Hospital in New York City, New York, and also at Blumer College, Hartford, Connecticut in 1923 and 1924. Then he became an instructor in East or West Hartford, and may still be there. Anyone having any information, please write to Vernon W. Hames, 7 Clinton Street, Brooklyn, New York.

ROCK HENRY—He is my father and was last heard from in 1922, at which time he was in Brookline, Massachusetts. He was born in New Brunswick, Canada. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please communicate with his son, Francis Rock, R. F. D., Becket, Massachusetts.

OLE, NORDLIE A.—He is about forty years old, weighs about 155 pounds and is five feet, seven inches tall. He is Norwegian and has fair hair and blue eyes. When last heard of in 1924 he was in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was a very dear friend of mine. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please write to "A. F." in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

SCOTT, LIZZIE MAY—She is my long lost sister. Her marriage name is unknown to me. She left her home in Jackson, Michigan, in 1890. "Lizzie, if you read this, won't you write me a line, please?" Or if anyone knows her whereabouts, please write to Mrs. Alice Scott Hawkins, 3329 Seymour Avenue Road, Rt. No. 2, Jackson, Michigan.

WATKINS, WILLIAM—"Daddy, why do you stay away so long? Have you forgotten us? You have been gone for five years. I am thirteen years old now. Mother has just come out of the hospital. We had a serious accident in September. A truck ran into us and I had a fractured skull and was unconscious for six days and mother was unconscious for five days. We are very sick yet and would love to see you, so please come home. We are living in Big Wells, Texas, now, and you can reach us if you write us in care of General Delivery there."—Billie.

SEILER, GEORGE—He is about sixty-five years old and when last heard from he was in Canada. He was a building contractor in Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania. "You can trust me, Uncle George." If anyone knows his whereabouts please write to John Siegner, Jr., 61 Kerr Avenue, Painesville, Ohio.

SCOTT, GALON JOSEPH—He is sixty-eight years old, but looks much younger. He has a light complexion, hair that is now graying and he speaks with a soft Southern accent. He is six feet tall and weighs about two hundred and twenty-five pounds. He has two sons, Homer, who lives in Fort Worth, Texas, and J. B., who lives somewhere in California. When he was last seen in April, 1936, in Davenport, Washington, he was on his way to California. His wife is on the ranch and wishes that he would come home. If anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please write to Gladys Johnson, White Sulphur Springs, Montana.

WINFIELD, MARY and LAFAYETTE—I would like to get in touch with these people or their children, Tena, Doreath and Pearl. Mary's maiden name was McKinley. They were last heard from in 1911 at which time they were in Hoxie, Kansas. Lafayette was a grading contractor. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to me. I have some important news for them. T. N. McKinley, Taylor, Arkansas.

MONTGOMERY, BILL—He was last heard from in 1912 when working on a grain boat at Duluth, Minnesota. He is forty-six years old, five feet, nine inches tall, has red hair, brown eyes. He was a member of the Salvation Army band in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. "Bill, please get in touch with your sister, Bella." Or if anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please write to Mrs. H. Behrens, 747 Wellington St. E., Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

HOOD, JOSEPH, CLARICE and JOSEPH, JR.—He is my brother, and Clarice and Joseph, Jr., are his two children. He is thirty-eight years old and the children are around thirteen or fourteen. They lived in Oakland and Fresno, California, and Eugene, Oregon. He is an ex-soldier and was last heard of in Oakland. His father and sisters would be so glad to hear from him again. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to Mrs. John Gann, Sale Creek, Tennessee.

There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

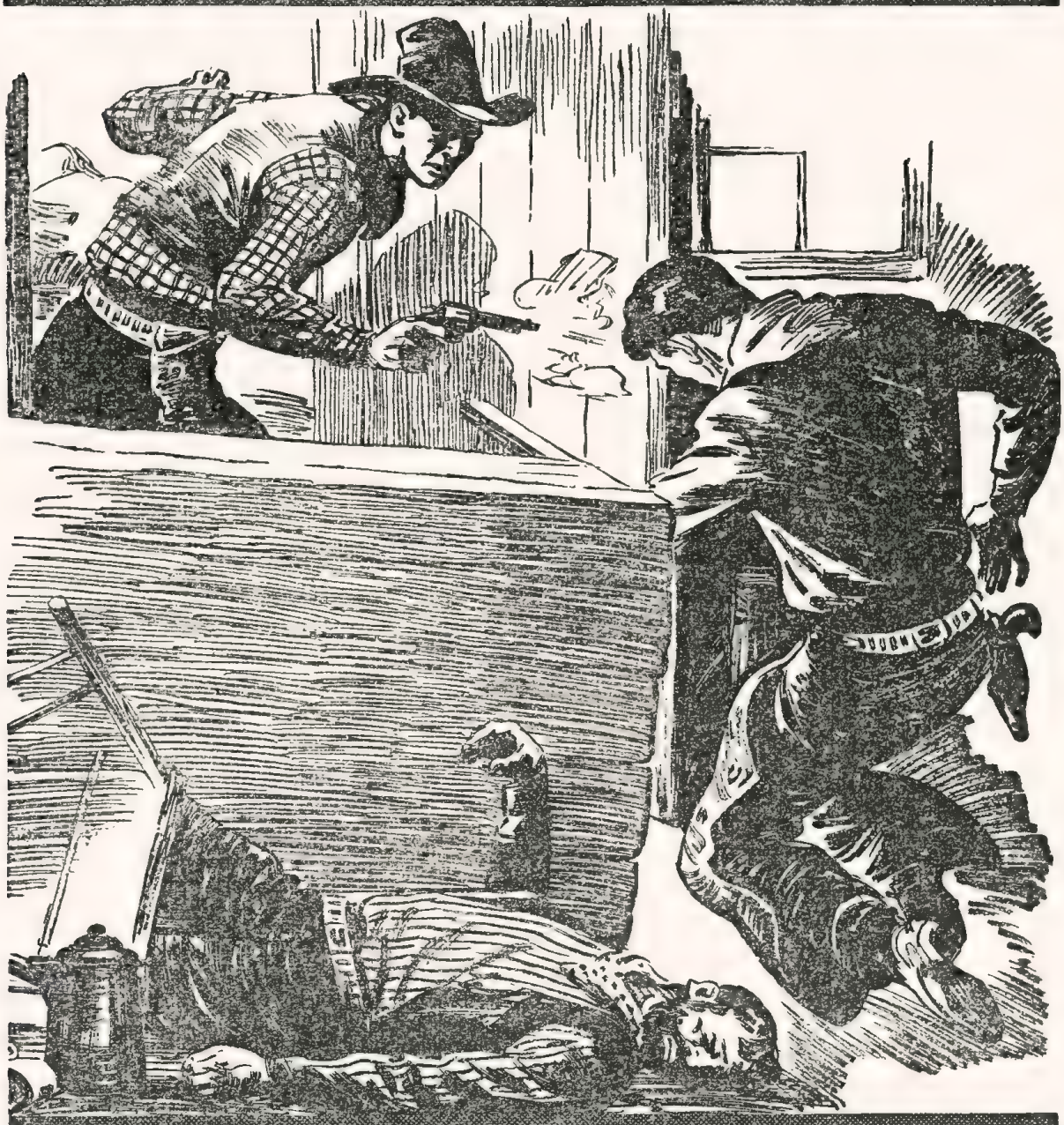
While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

RANGE WISE



by L. P. HOLMES

Range Wise

THE last three-year-old left in the loading pen was a stubborn, scary brute. As Johnny Lester tried to herd it into the chute, it dodged and ducked and raced past him to the lower end of the pen again.

Chick Speckter who was standing up by the chute with Stevens, the buyer for Marland Brothers, was losing patience.

"Hurry up, Lester," he yelled sharply. "We ain't got forever to load these cattle. Quit playing peekaboo with that critter. Pour the riata end to it and get it into this chute. To think that Buck Wright goes on paying you wages as a cowpuncher. If I had my way I'd—"

Speckter's words ran off into a burst of profanity. Johnny Lester heard it all, although he seemed not to. But his blue eyes narrowed a little more and little white lines deepened about his nostrils. That was Speckter all over. Standing around and giving orders and rawhiding a man instead of getting into the pen and giving a hand. And Luke Hand, Speckter's inevitable satellite, doing nothing more strenuous than poling the cattle through the chute and into the waiting car.

That was the way it had been on the drive all the way from the Bar 90. Johnny had done most of the work. Not that he minded working plenty hard for his wages, but Speckter's tongue was getting him down. One of these days, Johnny told himself grimly, he'd bust loose and hoe the hombre's ears down.

Speckter's order to use his riata end on that stubborn whiteface was just like the man. Always bullying his way through, with men, cattle or horses. Using a riata end on this critter wouldn't do any good. Only make it wilder. All the job needed was a little patience.

Johnny got the whiteface headed for the chute again, cornered it, swung his pony deftly back and forth as the brute tried to dodge again. And then, as though submitting to the inevitable the whiteface scrambled up the chute and into the car. Luke Hand slammed the car door shut, and that was that.

Johnny rode back to the gate of the pen, opened it, and led his sweating horse around to where Speckter and Stevens, the buyer, stood. Stevens was making some entries in a notebook.

"Fair enough, boys," he said cheerfully. "Count was right and the cattle were right. You fellas amble over to the High Top and order up a couple of rounds of drinks on me. I'll be over as soon as I stop at the bank and cash a draft. Buck Wright likes to be paid in cash, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," said Speckter. "He does. Only we'll meet you at the Wells Fargo office, Stevens. Luke and me figure to play around for a couple of days before heading back to the ranch. And I don't want to be packing six thousand dollars of the old man's money in my jeans. I'll send it in to Lodge Pole by the stage."

Stevens chuckled. "Easy to see why Buck Wright likes you for a foreman, Chick. You're hard-headed. Fair enough, I'll meet you at the Wells Fargo office in fifteen minutes."

Stevens hurried off. Johnny Lester turned to Speckter. "All right with you if I head for home right away?" he asked.

YOU can head for hell if you want to, and I'd be tickled to death," snapped Speckter. "Only don't hang around me. As a cowhand you ain't worth yore salt and when I get home I'm going to tell Buck Wright so. You haven't done enough work on this drive to earn yore grub."

Johnny knew he was foolish to let his temper get away from him, for Buck Wright put powerful store in what Chick Speckter said. But this last taunt was the final straw.

"That," said Johnny flatly, "is a damn lie. I did more work on this drive than you and Luke Hand put together."

It might have been that Speckter was surprised to have Johnny answer back for the first time since he had started a systematic rawhiding two years before. At any rate, Speckter just stared for a moment, then hunched his right shoulder and drove a whistling fist at Johnny's dusty, sweat-streaked face.

"Call me a liar," he yelled. "I'll break—"

Speckter's flailing fist found only empty air, for Johnny had ducked under it, smooth and fast. And the foreman quit his tirade because a lean, brown, rock-hard fist suddenly smashed him square on the mouth. Speckter staggered back, hit the corral fence and bounced off it, swinging both fists wickedly.

Johnny side-stepped and spun his opponent half around with another explosive right hander. The foreman was big, burly, tough. An ordinary man would have gone down under that larrup, but not Speckter. He came back, a little more warily, but strong and livid with fury.

Johnny would have side-stepped again, but he stumbled over a foot that Luke Hand had treacherously shoved out. Half falling, Johnny ran squarely into one of Speckter's driving fists. The blow knocked him flat on his back. Bellowing in

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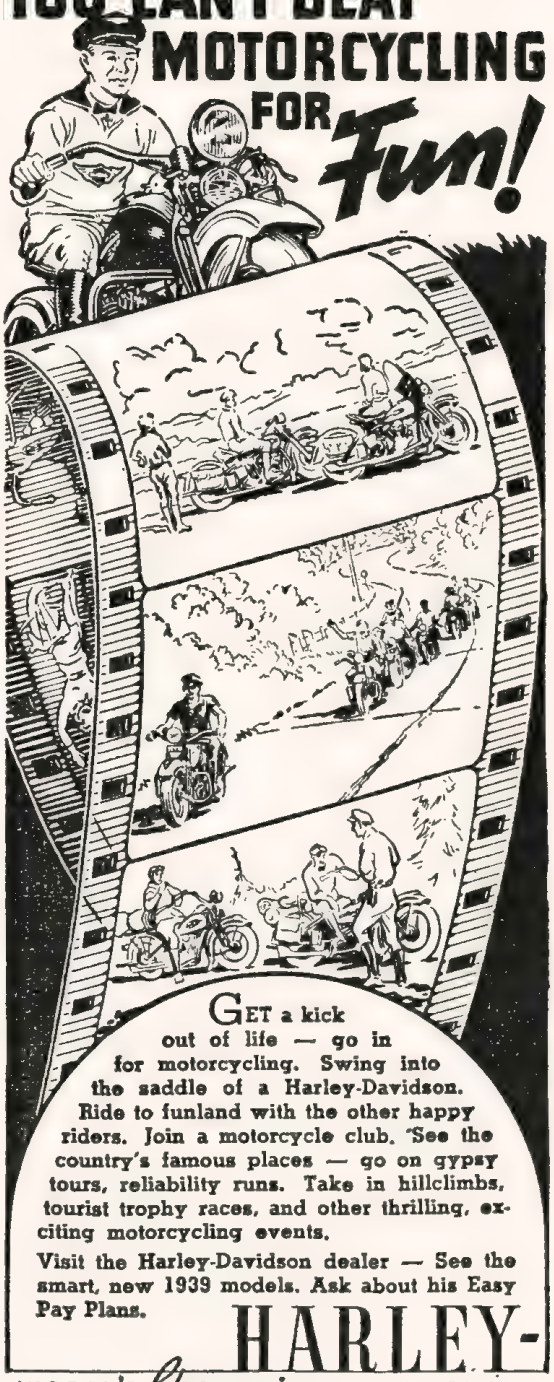

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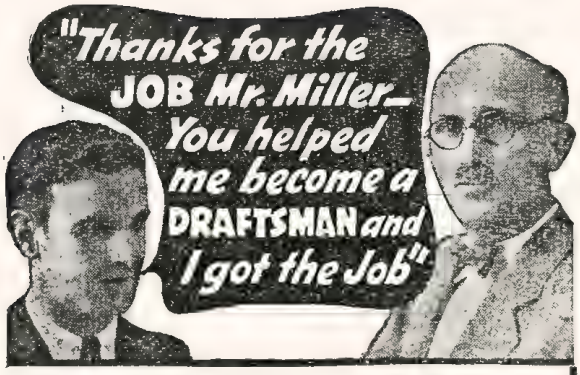

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triumph, Speckter charged at him, kicking out with both boots. He was like that, ruthless, brutal, ready to take any advantage, fair or not.

Johnny rolled, not away, but toward Speckter, a maneuver that took the other by surprise. It muffled one of Speckter's kicks, made his second a glancing blow. And then Johnny, grabbing at Speckter's feet, tripped him, and the foreman went headlong.

Johnny was up in a surge of fury, and ready to take care of Luke Hand.

"You low . . . sneakin' . . . coyote!" raged Johnny, punctuating his words with driving fists. Luke Hand, gaunt and fox-faced, didn't have Speckter's resistance. Johnny's third punch was a right-hander that started from way back and nearly tore Hand's head off. Luke went down in a sprawl, stiff as a plank. Then Johnny whirled to meet the on-charging Speckter.

He took a glancing blow along the side of the head before he could get set, but he only shook it off and got inside, driving both fists deep into Speckter's body. Those punches hurt. Johnny heard Speckter grunt as they landed, so he kept up a barrage on the foreman's mid-section, his head hunched between his shoulders.

Speckter gave ground and Johnny kept after him like a wild man. All his damned-up resentment against Speckter's thousand injustices found expression in Johnny's ripping fists. Speckter was tough all right, but not tough enough to take it forever. He dropped his hands toward his guns, leaving his jaw wide open.

Johnny needed no better opportunity. He got one away that started with a surge of power clear from his toes. His driving fists found Speckter's jaw with a crack like a breaking board. Speckter went down on his face, limp and sprawled, as cold as Luke Hand was.

Johnny stepped back, blowing on his skinned knuckles as he watched the two men he had downed. Then he took his neckerchief and mopped the blood that was trickling from his own split lips. He looked around. Everything was quiet. The cattle cars made a barrier that had hidden the fracas from the eyes of anybody in the town of Toltec, which was on the other side of the tracks.

Johnny smiled grimly. Speckter and Hand would probably be late in keeping their appointment with Stevens at the Wells Fargo office, but they'd live to know better next time. He turned to his horse, mounted and circled the loading pens, heading out into the open range beyond.

JOHNNY LESTER did not go straight back to the Bar 90. If Speckter and Hand were figuring on a couple of days off, he reckoned, he was entitled to a little vacation. He decided to head over to the Micmac Creek country and spend a couple of days with the Moultrie boys, Sarg and Coony.

It was quite a ride over to the Moultrie Ranch, and Johnny had to spend one night out. He hit the Double M at midmorning of the following day, weary and hungry as a wolf. The Moultrie boys were not at home, but on the cabin door was a penciled note:

> Up on Baldy laying in a little venison. Be back Thursday. Make yoreself at home, friend. SARG AND COONY.

Johnny grinned. That was like Sarg and Coony. Salt of the earth, those two boys. Johnny made himself at home. He cooked and ate a huge meal, corralled and fed his horse, then stretched out on a bunk for a good sleep.

Thursday was four days away, so Johnny did not wait for the return of the Moultries. He laid up for two days, giving his face a chance to heal. To kill time he did a few chores about the place, chopped and split five times the amount of wood he had used up. Then, with a little sack of grub tied behind his saddle, he headed for the Bar 90, seventy long miles to the south and west. All through the two-day ride he saw not a soul, though he did, at Maverick Creek, run across the fairly fresh trail of three horses, heading west.

Purely through habit and in search of something to break the monotony of lonely riding, Johnny studied that sign fairly thoroughly. One of the horses that had passed over the trail had peculiarly long, oval hoofs.

"Mink Garrison's blaze-faced roan," muttered Johnny. "That Oregon horse he traded Spud Cardwell out of. Wonder what brings Garrison down this way. Last I heard of him he was huntin' wild broncs over in the mesa country behind Baldy. One thing is a cinch. Wherever Garrison is, you can bet there's misery for somebody. He's one ornery jasper, Garrison is."

The evening of that first day, Johnny camped at Indian Pipe Spring and, when a flock of sage hens came in to drink, Johnny augmented his little grub supply by shooting a couple with his battered old six-gun.

Just before sunset of the second day, Johnny rode in at the Bar 90. For the last five miles he had been wondering if Chick Speckter would be small enough to bring their quarrel home with him.

As foreman of the Bar 90, Speckter could, if he wanted to, force the issue and get the feather tied to

Johnny. And Johnny didn't want that, for several reasons. One was that he liked the old Bar 90. Buck Wright was a pretty good hombre to work for and for the most part the Bar 90 gang were a fine crowd of boys. And then there was Tess Wright, the old man's daughter. It sort of made a man feel contented and happy to be working on a spread with a girl like Tess around. It was good to come in from a hard day's work, to wash and clean up, have a good supper and them maybe sit on the ranchhouse porch in the warm, sweet dusk and listen to Tess' gay voice and cheery laughter. And maybe, if a fellow was lucky, Tess would perch her slim self on the steps beside him and josh back and forth.

Of course Chick Speckter didn't like that. He was pretty bossy about Tess. Johnny reckoned that maybe it was because of Tess that Speckter seemed always to have it in for him, for Tess seemed to like him pretty well. Johnny knew how he felt toward Tess—and sighed, for there wasn't much hope for an ordinary forty-a-month-and-found cowhand.

Johnny found himself right up at the corrals before he realized there was quite a number of saddled horses standing around, strange horses. He wondered about that while he put up his own bronc and headed for the bunkhouse. Before he could reach it, however, old Buck Wright's deep rumble came to him.

"Hey, Lester, come up here a minute."

JOHNNY turned toward the ranchhouse. There were a lot of men on the porch. Buck Wright was standing at the top of the steps. With him was Chick Speckter. Johnny's heart sank. He might have known it. Speckter had beaten him home from Toltec and played the crybaby. Here was trouble, sure enough.

Johnny clanked up the steps. "Hello, everybody," he drawled. "What do you want, Buck?"

Buck Wright, a big, gaunt, grizzled-headed man, looked Johnny over somberly. "Where you been?" he growled. "Don't take any four days to ride down from Toltec."

"I swung over to Micmac Creek to say hello to Sarg and Coony Moultrie," answered Johnny. "Thought you wouldn't mind if I took a couple of days off, boss."

"Huh," grunted Wright. "This yore knife?"

Johnny looked at the old stock knife which Buck Wright held in a gnarled hand.

"Yeah," said Johnny. "That's my knife. Where'd you find it? I could have used it last evening to dress a couple of sage hens I shot for supper back at Indian Pipe Spring. Wondered where I'd lost it."

Chick Speckter laughed thinly. "You know damn well where we found it, Lester. You shouldn't be so careless in leaving yore callin' cards around."

"Huh?" mumbled Johnny, surprised. "I don't savvy what you mean."

Another man who had been half hidden behind Buck Wright's gaunt bulk, stepped into view. Lean and thin and wrikled as old leather, this man was, but with alert, cool eyes and a square jaw. It was Tom Jeffrey, Toltac's sheriff. He had a gun in his hand, and the muzzle was bearing steadily on Johnny's midriff.

"Stay put," he barked. "I'm taking yore gun."

Johnny was too dumfounded to argue. He felt the weight of his gun leave his sagging holster.

"What the devil?" he gasped.

"You're under arrest," said Tom Jeffrey crisply, "for holding up the Toltec-Lodge Pole stage, for killing old Bronco Sims, and for running off with the Wells Fargo box containing six thousand dollars in hard cash."

Johnny's confusion left him. He grew cool and quiet. "You're dragging yore rope, Tom. That's all news to me."

"Yeah?" Then how come yore knife . . . that one Buck's got there, was left lyin' on the ground where you cut the traces of the stage team and turned 'em loose? And how come it took you four days to ride down from Toltec when it's an easy two-day ride?"

"I told you I was visiting the Moultrie boys over on Micmac Creek."

"Maybe you were," said Jeffrey dryly. "I'll get in touch with Sarg and Coony and find out if you were with them. If you were, then I admit you got a pretty fair alibi. If you weren't . . . well, you stand a pretty fair chance of stretching rope. Bronco Sims was a harmless old coot, but a pretty good man in his way."

Johnny felt suddenly cold at the pit of his stomach. Sarg and Coony Moultrie hadn't been at the ranch and if he tried to explain that he'd hung around for a couple of days anyway to let his face heal up some, it would sound awful thin right now.

"Where did you leave that money?" rasped Jeffrey. "You knew there'd be six thousad dollars in that Wells Fargo box. What did you do with it?"

"Shore he knew it would be there," put in Chick Speckter. "He heard me tell Stevens, the cattle buyer, that I was going to send the money for that shipping herd back to Lodge Pole by the stage. I knew all along he was a tinhorn, but I didn't think he was low enough to steal money from his boss, the man who's been paying him wages."

Johnny went white and took a step toward Speckter. But Jeffrey jammed his gun in the cowboy's side.

"Take it easy, Lester. You got a lot of things to explain. I'm heading back for Toltec with you in the morning." He turned to Wright. "You got any place on the ranch I can lock him up where he'll be safe for the night, Buck?"

Speckter answered the question. "The saddle shed is plenty stout, Tom. It can be padlocked."

"Come on," said Jeffrey, taking Johnny by the arm.

Johnny looked appealingly at Buck Wright. "Listen, boss. I didn't do this. You know I wouldn't do a thing—"

Buck Wright was looking over his head, his face grim and emotionless. He was still balancing that damning knife in his big hand.

"Come on, Lester," said Jeffrey again. And this time Johnny followed along, feeling weary and bewildered.

JOHNNY knew every inch of that saddle shed. Even in the black dark he could find his way about. But he wasn't bothering to move. He just squatted on his heels against one wall, rolling and smoking one cigarette after another. It was useless to try to think because nothing made sense. And it took all the starch out of a man to have Buck Wright so ready to believe he had pulled the ornery trick he was accused of.

The lock on the door rattled, and voices sounded outside. Johnny's head jerked up. One of those voices was soft and sweet—and very indignant.

"I don't care whether you found

Johnny's knife there or not, Sheriff Jeffrey. I don't care what you or dad or anybody else thinks. I know Johnny Lester never held up any stage. He just isn't that sort. And you're not going to starve him to death. I'm taking some supper in to him."

Suddenly the mental paralysis that had gripped him left Johnny. He was warm all through. That was Tess Wright out there, bless her gallant little heart. And she, of the whole damn crowd, was thinking straight and believing in him.

The door opened, showing the yellow light of a lantern. "Stay put, Lester," growled Tom Jeffrey. "Miss Tess has got some supper here for you. Don't try anything fancy or it'll be yore hard luck."

Tess came in, slim and quick and graceful, carrying a tray of steaming dishes. Her clear brown eyes met Johnny's eager ones gravely.

"I think they're all crazy, Johnny," she said. "I told dad so. I told him he ought to be ashamed of himself."

"Thanks, Tess," Johnny said quietly. "Yore feeling this way shore helps more than you'll ever dream. You . . . you're swell."

Tess' slim, brown throat was throbbing a trifle as she put the tray on a bench. Johnny stepped over beside her. From the door, with lantern lifted high, Tom Jeffrey was watching them closely. But Tess' back was to him so he could not see her lips move. Nor could he hear the faintest of whispers that came from her soft lips. But Johnny heard the cryptic sentence she spoke.

"*In my saddlebags.*"

Tess turned back to the door. "I'll have some blankets brought down to you, Johnny."

Johnny smiled at her. "You're swell, Tess," he said again.

She went out. The door shut and the lock clicked tight once more. And then it was pitch-dark in there again. Johnny felt for the dishes, rattled them slightly. Then, with surging eagerness and on tiptoe, he sought the saddle rack. Swiftly he went along the hulls, identifying them by feel. This one was Buck Wright's favorite kak, a long, wide Visalia tree, without the bucking rolls affected by so many of the newer saddles. This was the fancy kak Monte Weaver had won at the rodeo in Toltec two years ago. This one Barney Daggs' rig and this—ah—this was Tess' saddle, hand-carved and stamped, silver-mounted.

Johnny's eager fingers found the saddlebags strapped across the cantle skirts, unbuckled them. The first he explored held a silk scarf, tangled with a pair of tiny spurs. In the second was a gun, the little slim-barreled .38 which Tess always carried along when she went riding. Clever little Tess! She remembered that gun, when no one else had. In the bottom of the bag was a handful of loose cartridges.

Johnny's exploring fingers told him the gun was loaded. He dropped it into his empty holster, pocketed the spare cartridges. Then he felt his way back to the tray on the bench and ate hungrily, scratching an occasional match to locate the food.

Johnny's mind worked as busily as his jaws. Tess wouldn't have tipped him off to that gun if she didn't have some other scheme in her pretty head. She had told him she was sending him down some blankets. That would be the time to make his break. He gulped the remaining food, so that he might be ready.

He had time to smoke a couple of cigarettes before any further in-

terruption came. Then he heard Tess' voice outside once more. "Here are those blankets, Mr. Jeffrey. Will you take them in or shall I?"

"I only got two hands," grunted the sheriff. "And I got to hold this lantern. You bring 'em in."

Again the door opened, again the lantern flared. Tess come in, her arms full of blankets. Jeffrey was close behind her.

"I'm looking through that bundle," he said severely. "Seeing where yore sentiments lay, young lady, I'm not easy in my mind. You might have something hid in those blankets . . . a gun, maybe."

Johnny stood with his left side to the door so Jeffrey could not see the gun in his holster.

"I'm not going to like you, Tom . . . if you get tough with Tess," he drawled.

"Huh!" muttered the sheriff. "I'm not getting tough with any lady. I'm just bein' careful, that's all."

The sheriff put the lantern on the floor and began opening out the blankets. Johnny made a swift movement, shoved out a long arm. A chill circle bore against the side of Jeffrey's neck.

"Don't move, Tom," Johnny said softly. "You got careful too late. On yore face . . . quick!"

Tom Jeffrey was no coward—neither was he a fool. A man never

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knew what some reckless young cowhand, accused of stage robbery and murder, might do. So the sheriff flattened out on his face as ordered.

Two minutes later, Tom Jeffrey was securely bound and gagged and Johnny Lester and Tess Wright were outside the saddle shed, with the lantern extinguished. Johnny locked the door. At his shoulder Tess was sobbing a little.

"Quick!" she choked. "Quick, Johnny. I've got a horse ready down below the corrals. Don't let them catch you again. Speckter is starting lynch talk. Oh, Johnny—"

Johnny couldn't figure out how it happened, but suddenly she was in his arms, clinging to him, slim and shaking. Her lips found his.

"Say," growled someone close by, "What's going on?"

It was Chick Speckter's voice!

Johnny swung Tess aside and leaped, crashing into the advancing, shadowy bulk of the foreman. And Johnny laid the barrel of that little .38 gun across Speckter's head with such wicked force that the man only grunted and dropped.

Tess was tugging at Johnny's arm. "Hurry! Hurry, Johnny!" she urged.

Johnny nearly crushed her to him, then left her, feeling dazed and breathless. There was the faintest mutter of departing hoofs, then silence.

DAYLIGHT found Johnny Lester far to the north again. He had headed that way in the first place, thinking about the mesa country beyond Baldy where a hunted man could hide out about as well as anywhere he knew. But, while riding the night out, Johnny had done a lot of thinking. First about that knife of his. Where could he have lost it?

He knew he had had it along during most of the drive with the ship-

ping herd up to Toltec. The night before he and Luke Hand and Speckter had hazed the herd into the Toltec shipping pens, he'd had the knife. He remembered fixing his cinch, using the knife to trim up a new latigo. He might have lost it there.

Then he thought of something else. Maybe he had lost it during that fight with Speckter by the shipping pens. When Hand had so treacherously tripped him and Speckter had knocked him down and tried to put the boots to him, he had done some fancy rolling along the ground to get away from the foreman's flailing feet. The knife might easily have slipped out of his pocket, that way. In which case Speckter or Hand could have found it and used it as a plant!

Johnny's eyes began to gleam. Why not? The idea was a terrific one, but why not? He wasn't the only one who had known that Buck Wright's money would be on the stage. Speckter and Hand had known it, too!

Johnny's brain began to turn somersaults. He couldn't go chasing a pipe dream. Yet if he could tie that robbery and killing to the guilty parties, it sure wouldn't hurt his case any. He wished he'd found out just where the holdup took place. Then he could drift in that way, taking a long chance of course, but maybe locating some sign that might help. Johnny knew without conceit that he was pretty range wise. He could read sign with any of them, any old day. Yeah, if he could pick up a trail—

Johnny had another brainstorm. How about that trail he had run across up at Maverick Creek, the one that showed that Mink Garrison's blaze-faced Oregon horse had passed that way with two other horses? The remembrance of that set Johnny straight for Maverick Creek.

Tess, bless her heart, had seen that there was some grub tied to the saddle of the getaway horse, and Johnny ate a frugal breakfast. It had been a night of hard riding, so while he ate, Johnny unsaddled and gave his horse a chance to roll and graze and rest for an hour. Then once more he was in the saddle and riding.

He found the trail of those three horses. It wasn't as clear as the day before, but plenty plain for a man who was range wise. Johnny followed it at a steady jog. It headed west, which didn't bring him any closer to the mesa country beyond Baldy. In fact, it took him out across country where he'd be liable to run into anything at any time. Yet he didn't hesitate, for he had the feeling that this trail meant something. He had to take the chance.

Johnny felt that he had probably gotten a pretty good start from the Bar 90. Even after his escape was discovered they'd have to wait until daylight to pick up his trail, which meant they would be a good many hours behind. Just the same, he turned at intervals and watched along his back trail.

He hoped Tess wouldn't get into too much trouble over it all. Probably she wouldn't. Buck Wright put powerful store in his only daughter. She was the apple of his eye, and, even if Tom Jeffrey did get a little mean about it, Buck wouldn't let him rawhide her too much. Thinking of Tess made Johnny a little dizzy. The way she had clung to him—kissed him—

The trail kept on driving straight west. Then it broke slightly south

and began running out into the Belden Hills. The Belden Hills were malpais country, tangled and broken, full of washes and gulches and plenty brushy as a man rode deeper into them.

It grew a little harder to follow the trail now, but Johnny stuck to it, growing more alert with every stride of his weary horse. He glanced at the sun. Holy smokes! Just about midday. He'd been on that trail since early morning. If it went much further it would take him clear out of the country. Maybe he was away off in his guessing. It might be only the trail of Mink Garrison and a couple of other wild horse hunters Garrison had tied in with. Maybe it didn't mean a thing, had nothing to do with the stage robbery.

This doubt, rising stronger all the time, made Johnny rein in and twist in his saddle to look around. Almost instantly he spun his horse and sent it plunging down into a handy gulch. For, way out over to his left, he had caught a glimpse of something moving.

Johnny swept from the saddle and climbed back to the top of the ridge on foot, making a cautious survey from a clump of sheltering junipers and cedars.

There was that movement again. And as Johnny watched, a rider loomed on the crest of a bare ridge some six hundred yards distant. Johnny drew a deep breath as he realized that the rider had not seen him. If he had, the fellow wouldn't be shagging it along so steadily and against the skyline.

Johnny's eyes narrowed. Even at the distance there was something familiar about that rider. And the horse—Johnny knew that horse. It was Luke Hand's favorite mount, and the rider was Luke Hand himself!

LUKE HAND! Going where? Johnny watched, gauging angles of direction. If Luke Hand stuck to the angle he was traveling, he'd cut into the very sign Johnny was following. The blue of Johnny's eyes took on a metallic sheen. Things were shaping up. Pieces of a jumbled pattern were beginning to fall into place. He watched Luke Hand out of sight, then went back to his horse and killed about a quarter of an hour over a couple of cigarettes. Finally he got into his saddle again and took up the original trail once more.

He rode with increasing caution now, studying the trail very carefully. He covered the better part of two miles before he found what he was looking for. There, down the point of a low ridge fresh earth was gouged and dug where a horse had recently descended. And that horse had turned into the trail Johnny was following.

There was a flutter and blur nearby and a couple of sage hens mounted and sailed away on set wings. That meant water somewhere nearby. Johnny's caution increased. He held his horse to a walk. Abruptly Johnny smelled wood smoke.

He swung his horse into the heart of a brushy side gulch, dismounted and tethered the animal, then went ahead on foot. He climbed a low ridge, peered through the fringe of brush atop it, and sighed with satisfaction. Just beyond was a little open flat, not over two acres in extent. On the north side of it, close to the brush was an old sod shanty. A patch of green out in front showed a spring of water.

At the far side of the shanty was a rough brush corral, holding a blaze-faced roan. Another horse, ground-reined, was cropping at the scant greenery about the spring. And before the door of the cabin stood two men, talking. One of them was Luke Hand. The other was a lank, swarthy-faced individual with a ragged beard. He had a rifle cradled across one arm. Johnny knew him. It was Mink Garrison!

Even as Johnny watched, the two men entered the shanty, from which a thin ribbon of smoke was drifting, through a hole in the sod roof. Johnny losened the little .38 gun in his leather and began a fast, but low-crouched half circle through the brush. The end of that half circle found him sliding cautiously down through the thicket just north of the shanty.

When he edged noiselessly from the brush, he was close enough to the rear corner of the shanty to reach out and touch it. There he stood, listening. He could hear but the faintest murmur of voices. Those thick sod walls killed sound. If he wanted to hear anything, he had to get around to the door.

He drew the .38 gun, held it ready, and stole softly around the cabin. He crouched just short of the door. Now he could hear clearly.

"A half hour one way or another don't mean much," Mink Garrison was saying. "I was just putting a mess of grub together. You better stay and help me eat it, Luke."

Luke Hand agreed in his thin, lugubrious voice. "All right, Mink. I am pretty wolfish. Then we'll make tracks. With that damned Johnny Lester on the loose there's no telling where he'll lead that posse. If I was on the dodge like he is, I'd head for one of two places, either the mesa country back of Baldy, or right out into these Belden Hills. And if he heads out into this coun-

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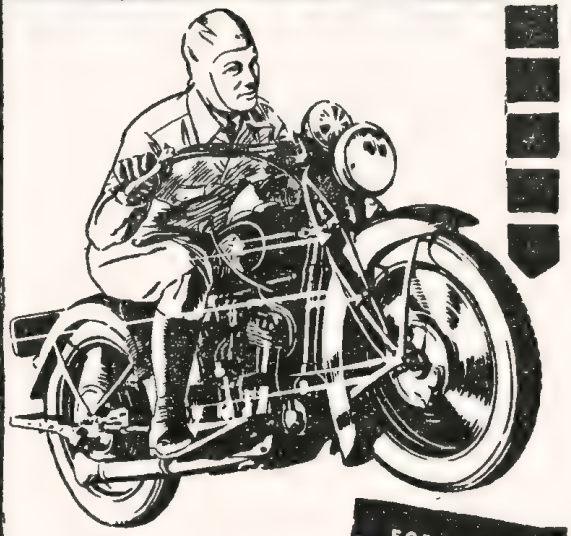

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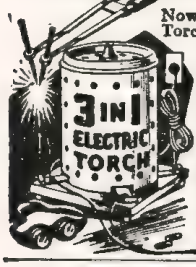

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try and the posse trails him here . . . well . . . right now I'd rather not have you bump into Tom Jeffrey. He might start asking questions."

Mink Garrison's harsh, wolfish laugh rang out. "You and me both, Luke. So that Wright girl helped Lester make his getaway, eh? I'll bet Chick Speckter is fit to be tied over that. He was pretty sweet on that gal himself, wasn't he?"

"Plenty. Chick is a business man, he is. He knows that whoever marries Tess Wright will someday own the Bar 90, and Chick aims to be that man. Yeah, Chick is sore as hell . . . and a little scared, too. You got that six thousand pesos safe, I suppose?"

"Right there in those saddlebags. When we finish with grub, we'll split it up, three ways. You can take yore share and Chick's with you. I'm going to drift down into the desert country for awhile until they catch up with Lester and put him away. Me, I can live high for quite some time on two thousand dollars."

Johnny Lester drew a deep breath and stepped through the doorway.

"Maybe," he ground out coldly. "Only you don't get it, Garrison."

Had the roof fallen in, the two men at the table could not have been more surprised. For a long second they sat frozen. Then Luke Hand whimpered and swallowed thickly. Luke's backbone wasn't very stout. Garrison, however, was made of sterner stuff. He knew that Johnny Lester had heard far too much. So Garrison gambled. He fell over backward, jerking a gun with one hand, drawing the table over as a shield with the other. His first shot whizzed by Johnny Lester's ear, so close that he felt heat scorching him.

The voice of the little .38 gun was thinner, sharper than the full-throated blast of Garrison's .45, but there was plenty of dynamite in the smaller slugs. Two of them drove

easily through the rough table top. One of them took Garrison just above the belt buckle, the other through the center of the throat. The man floundered and went down like a stricken animal, dead as he hit the floor.

Luke Hand's latent flare of courage was like the desperation of a cornered rat. With Johnny engrossed in downing Garrison, Hand tried a sneak draw. He wasn't fast enough. Johnny beat him to it and smashed his right shoulder with a third shot. Hand dropped his gun and Johnny kicked it to a far corner. Then he gun-whipped Luke soundly and thoroughly.

IT wasn't far away from sunset. Squatting on his heels in a blot of shadow at the edge of the Belden Hills, Johnny Lester watched the approach of Tom Jeffrey and his posse. Johnny grinned. Tom Jeffrey was plenty range wise himself. The darned old coot had found his trail and was sticking to it like a bloodhound. Well, he was due for a surprise and so were Buck Wright and Chick Speckter and all the rest of that posse. Particularly Chick Speckter.

Johnny waited until the posse was not over a hundred yards distant. Then he stood up, both hands lifted high above his head. Tom Jeffrey saw him instantly and halted the posse. He growled an order, then came on alone. Johnny walked down to meet him, both hands still high. The sheriff's eyes glinted with triumph.

"Lost yore nerve, eh, Lester?" he growled. "Figgered the wisest thing was to give up, huh? Well, you were wise. I'd have got you if I'd had to follow this trail plumb through hell. You made a fool of me at the Bar 90, you and that li'l' witch of a girl. But I got you now. Where's that gun you got hold of in the saddle shed?"

Johnny grinned. "Back on my saddle. I got a lot of things for you, Tom. I got yore stage robbers and I got the money."

Tom Jeffrey stared, open-mouthed. Then his jaws came together with a click. "No, you don't. You don't fool me a second time. I'm putting the cuffs on you, right now."

"Fair enough, Tom. I won't kick. Only do me this favor. I see Monte Weaver in that posse. Call him up here, will you? I want to tell him something."

Tom Jeffrey waited until he had handcuffed Johnny before calling out to Monte Weaver. Monte jogged up, a lean, cheery cowboy who had been Johnny's closest friend at the Bar 90. Monte looked uncomfortable.

"He made me come along, Johnny," he said. "Else I wouldn't be here."

"That's all right, Monte," grinned Johnny. "Listen, I got a lot of wild surprises coming up for this crowd. One thing I want you to do. You drift back to the posse, get close to Chick Speckter and stay there. Watch him like a hawk. That's all."

Monte eyed Johnny queerly for a moment, then nodded. "Can do," he said briefly, turning his horse.

"Hold on," growled the sheriff, "I'll call 'em up."

He waved an arm and the posse rode up. Weaver, as though just by chance, swung his horse in beside that of Chick Speckter. Speckter had a bandage about his head and his eyes, as he looked at Johnny, were venomous. Buck Wright

seemed more grim than he had the day before.

Johnny laughed at him. "Cheer up, boss. I'm still working for you. And I didn't rob no stage. I can show you plenty of proof now."

"Like hell!" snarled Chick Speckter. "You bushwhacking rat. Watch him, Tom. He's up to some other trick."

"No trick, Speckter," Johnny rapped, his voice going bleak. "Know what I got back there in the brush? I'll tell you. First I got the six thousand that was taken in that robbery. Next, I got Mink Garrison and Luke Hand. Garrison is dead, but Hand only has a bum shoulder. And Hand ain't what you'd call very stout in the spine. He's told me all about you and him and Garrison pulling that holdup. And he's anxious to tell Tom Jeffrey the story. Figgers he can save his hide by talking. And . . . watch him, Monte!"

MONTE was watching, all right. For Speckter, his face turning a sickly gray as Johnny spoke, brought out a sudden, blistering curse and snatched at his gun. But Monte, forewarned and alert, leaned over and swung his ready gun. And for the second time in twenty-four hours, Chick Speckter went down under a clubbing blow.

Ten minutes later, his right arm in a sling, his narrow face pasty with pain and fear, Luke Hand told his story to an amazed posse.

"We had it figgered out before we even started for Toltec with that shipping herd. Speckter and me bumped into Garrison one day while we were rounding up those three hundred head out on the home range. We planned the whole thing there. Speckter was to demand cash from Stevens, the cattle buyer and use Stevens as a witness that he started the cash for Lodge Pole by stage. Garrison was waiting for us, hid out about five miles along the road from Toltec. We joined him there, moved farther out and waited for the stage. When it came along, we pulled the holdup. Garrison was the one who killed Bronco Sims. That burned Speckter and me up some, for we didn't want no killing. But Garrison was a wolf.

"Speckter and Lester had a brawl, right after the cattle were loaded and in the mix-up, Lester lost his knife. It had his initials and the Bar 90 brand carved in the handle and when Speckter found it, after the fight, he got the idea of planting it to put Lester in a hole. I reckon that's all."

"Not all," snorted Tom Jeffrey. "Just the beginning of plenty of trouble for you and Speckter, Hand. Buck, this money is yores. Take it. These two hombres and that dead snake yonder go to Toltec with me!"

"How about me?" drawled Johnny Lester.

"Huh!" grunted the sheriff with twinkling eyes. "You can go fan yore ears in the wind. Only was I Buck Wright, I'd shore see to it that a range-wise jasper like you stayed on my pay roll."

"I had that all figgered out," rumbled Buck Wright. His deep eyes twinkled. "I got to take him home in self-defense. Else Tess would probably raise hell with me."

"Tess," chuckled the sheriff, "is one plenty wise li'l' lady. How about that, Johnny?"

Johnny grinned, as a slow flush began at the tips of his ears and worked up. "You bet. Plenty!"

THE END

Aces Come High

Continued from page 90

sounded patient yet his eyes were mocking.

Valdez ran a tongue along dry lips. "I am not interested in any explanation," he said at last. "I am going."

"You'll stay until I tell you you can go," snapped Storm. "If I have to floor you and sit on you, you'll stay until we talk these things out once and for all without any hedging. We'll spread all our cards out face up and have done with it."

"But we are not alone, señor," Valdez protested.

"We're the way I want us to be," said Storm. "Haven't I said already that Bull Strake is a friend of mine? What I mean by that is that he needs me and I need him. As for you, Señor Don Rodriguez Valdez y Munoz, you need both of us. Come to think of it, if you did try to insist on going home I wouldn't have to get out of my chair to change your mind for you. All I'd do would be ask whether you're ready to lose the one love of your sentimental and misspent life—your valley that you call the earthly Paradise!"

A wicked malevolence gleamed in Valdez's narrowed eyes.

"You would never dare! There is something you are not to forget!" he spat back, bristling with threat.

Storm only laughed and turned

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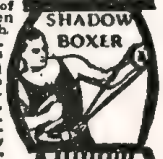

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to Strake. "Bull," he said, "in a minute he is going to tell you that he suspected me of having murdered Willard Hale and of having put the blame for it on my stallion, Destruction!"

"It is not a thing I suspect!" fumed Valdez, goaded at last beyond self-control. "It is a thing that I know—*because I saw!*"

"What do you think of that, Bull?" asked Storm, still mockingly.

"I'll be damned!" said Bull Strake.

Any man looking at Valdez could see that he meant what he said. It was the truth. He had seen Tom Storm kill Willard Hale. That was a good two or three years ago, as Strake remembered. And all this while Valdez had kept his mouth shut! Why?

"Now!" said Tom Storm. He looked ready to leap to his feet but he continued to sit quite still. "We are going to get somewhere." Again he addressed Strake: "What do you think, Bull, of a man who sees another man commit a murder and then keeps still about it?"

"Likely he gets paid for keeping mum," Strake answered.

"And if the word gets around," continued Storm, "that a man had kept mum in such a case and for such a reason, what are they apt to do to him?"

"I remember Lefty Barstow," said Strake reminiscently. "He was in the know when Corks Copley butchered old man Reese. When they hung Corks they strung Lefty up alongside him."

"Such things happen," nodded Storm. Valdez shuddered. "Maybe you remember about Corks Copley and Lefty Barstow, too," Storm said. "But never mind ancient history. We were going to talk about a mortgage. The record will show, Valdez, that I made you a loan of five thousand dollars quite a while ago. If folks check on dates they'll find the loan was made the day after my

horse trampled Hale to death. Not that there was any—"

"Have you gone crazy!" burst from Valdez. Again he looked at Bull Strake whose interest was as frank as a child's. "At least I'd think you'd want us to be private—"

NOT that there was any mortgage to begin with," Storm went on, unheeding. "I just gave you a check, and you endorsed and cashed it, and I've kept the check against a time like this. Later you wanted other sums, quite a few of them, *amigo mio*, and so the mortgage on Paradise Valley came into being. And you always said to yourself, 'What the hell! I've got the deadwood on Tom Storm. He'll never dare force me to pay a cent back.' But maybe I will. Maybe I'm ready right now to foreclose. Then again maybe I might even tear the papers up, old check and all, and call everything square."

"It's thirsty work listening, Storm," Bull Strake put in. "Me, I want a drink."

"In the kitchen," said Storm. "Bring the bottle in. And a couple of glasses."

When Strake brought in bottle and glasses the harrassed Valdez was the first to take his drink.

"Now!" said Storm. "Now for the other matter. You haven't told me yet what has happened to little Rita's inheritance."

"What I said was that I don't know what you mean," sputtered Valdez.

"There was about seventy-five thousand dollars of it, that's what I mean," Storm told him. "And it's gone now, that's what I mean. Every damn cent of it. Gone through your fingers across Black Jack's tables and across a string of tables down along the border. And little Rita never the wiser. Nobody any the wiser except you, and me—and now Bull Strake!"

"It's a lie! Perhaps a few unfortunate investments, conservative though they were—"

"You've had a bully good time playing me for a sucker," said Storm, "and I've let you enjoy yourself all this time because it's you that's been the sucker and in the end I'm not losing a red cent. Instead I am making a good thing, what with interest piling up on my money or in place of that, Paradise Valley whenever I want to gather it in."

"You wouldn't dare! I tell you, you don't dare!"

"Because you'd rush off and tell the world that I killed a man and that you saw it happen! Don't make me laugh!

Storm went on with what he had in mind.

"Now we get back to Ross Haveril as I said we would. He is going to make trouble, but that isn't what he came back for because he didn't know I was here. I've known Ross Haveril a long time. I know that he was born and raised as a kid in Secret Valley. He always planned, when he lined his pockets, to come back. Luke Oliver owns Secret Valley now. It will be Haveril's before another day is past. But Haveril's dream is begger than just the old Haveril home. He has the same hunch that some of the rest of us have had. He wants my valley and he wants Paradise Valley, too. He is going to find out that I hold a mortgage on Paradise Valley that you can't pay off. He is going to try to buy that mortgage from me. And he is going to try to squeeze me out of Lost Valley. He had all this in his head when I knew him down in South America."

Storm looked moodily thoughtful.

"I could save myself a lot of grief if I turned over your mortgage to him," he continued. "He'd have you kicked out in no time, and he might forget to worry about Lost Valley for a while."

"Why didn't you burn him down tonight while you had the chance?" asked Bull Strake.

HE'S got money, and don't you forget it," Storm went on, ignoring Bull's query. "He's hard-headed, and he's a lucky devil. He swore years ago that he'd be damned if he ever came back here until he could do just what I've said. Well, let's get along. There are two points left hanging, and here they are: First, my good Señor Valdez, I'm going to marry your little niece, Rita. That's agreed, isn't it?"

Valdez started to agree, then bethought his trampled dignity. "Until you took it upon yourself, señor, to address me as you have tonight," he said loftily, "I had hoped—"

"Oh, chuck all that overboard," said Storm. "As I say, I marry Rita, and marry her right off. Within a week at the longest."

"Damn it, Storm, I thought Black Jack's girl—" Bull Strake broke in.

"Leave her out of it! Hear me?" said Storm, suddenly furious.

Then he settled back in his chair and slowly relaxed while his chest swelled to a deep intake of air.

"When Rita is my wife," he said, "you and I both begin to get what we want. You'll never lift your voice against your own niece's husband, not because you care the snap of your fingers for her, but because of your crazy pride. Though what in hell you've got to be proud of is beyond me. For my part when I marry her, I marry Paradise Valley. And I want Paradise Valley and mean to have it. Later we'll see about Secret Valley."

He paused a moment, watching Valdez craftily. Valdez took out his handkerchief and ran it across his brow. He looked sick.

A contemptuous smile touched Tom Storm's lips. "And now we come back again to Ross Haveril. If he's left to run hog-wild he's going to make trouble. Trouble for me, to begin with, and that will bounce along to you. So Haveril has got to be nipped in the bud." He glanced at Bull Strake. "That's where you come in, Bull."

Valdez looked a bit relieved. "Whatever your plans are for this Haveril, I do not need to know about them," he exclaimed. "It is for you and your friend here. If you want to talk about such things, I will be going!"

"Keep your shirt tail in, Valdez," ordered Storm. "I haven't finished yet. When you're in on a deal with me, you're in all the way, square up to your ears. I've said Bull Strake and I need each other. Well, we need you, too!"

"I'm not going to be a party to—a party to—"

"Finish it!" jeered Storm. "Put a name to it. Its right name."

A tremor rippled over the little man's body and he stared at Storm as though the man had hypnotized him.

"Listen," said Storm. "Here's where you come in. Here's what you are going to do. Your part's the easiest, but you'll be in as deep as we will. Listen."

And Don Rodriguez Valdez y Munoz listened, shuddering.

What is Tom Storm plotting against Ross Haveril? Will Haveril be able to outwit him? Will Bob Robers' murder be avenged? Breathtaking complications follow in the next installment. Don't miss it!

Famous Lost Mines

Continued from page 68

and certainly his gold must have come from somewhere. More than likely it came from the place he said it did, rather than just any stray canyon. Moreover, gold was found in the desert. But not in the canyon of the twin black buttes, which have never to this day been definitely re-identified. However, the Mesquite placer diggings were opened up and proved rich for a time, but it was not Peg Leg's mine. Gold was discovered at Salvation Springs and other places, and gradually the story of Smith's bonanza find slipped into limbo.

But about twenty years ago when the Southern Pacific was doing considerable railroad construction work in the Imperial Valley, an incident occurred which revived interest in Peg Leg's story. A gang of gandy dancers working out of Ogilby was quartered in a string of section cars at Glamis. The story varies in detail, but the essentials are the same. One day an old woman stumbled into the railroad camp. Some say she was an Indian, others, a Mexican. It doesn't matter. Without a word to anyone the old crone, half dead from thirst, dragged herself to the water tank and started to drink. From sheer exhaustion, she sank to her knees, and some of the railroaders rushed over to help her. As they approached, the woman gave a frightened cry, rose to her feet, and ran down the new-laid track away from them. Shouting that they meant no harm, the railroad men gave chase, but the woman turned off the tracks and plunged into the desert.

The foreman of the section gang called his men back. "Off her nut," he declared. "No sense chasin' her out in the sun there. Maybe she'll come back."

She didn't—ever. But when the men returned they found she had

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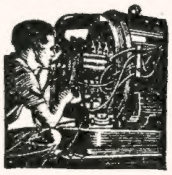

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left something beside the tank, a ragged piece of thin blanket tied at the corners which she had dropped in her hurried flight. The bundle was heavy. One of the men untied the knots in the blanket and for a long moment the gandy dancers stood around pop-eyed, staring at its contents. Before them lay bits of black rock splashed with flakes of yellow gold.

"Gosh, boys! There's a fortune there," exclaimed the foreman. "We've got to find the old woman and give it back to her. Maybe she'll tell us where she got the stuff."

A few minutes later the men were down the track again.

"She turned off here," said one. "No, it was farther down," another insisted. Uncertainty ensued. They turned off the track and hunted for hours, going out as far into the desert as they dared. But they never caught sight of the old woman, or really found her trail. At sundown the section gang straggled back to Glamis. The bit of blanket with its golden cargo was carefully gathered up.

Later when it was taken into town, it was estimated that there was about two thousand dollars' worth of gold in the black stones. What was far more important, when some old-time prospectors saw the treasure, and they were men who claimed actually to have seen the gold Peg Leg Smith originally brought out of the desert with him, they declared excitedly and without hesitation, "It's Smith's gold! Gold from the Peg Leg Smith mine!"

And it probably was.

At any rate this sudden apparent corroboration revived the Peg Leg story. It sent men scurrying into the desert again in search of the lost bonanza. Men are still looking for it, braving sun and sand in the hope they may some day return to civilization rich beyond all future wants.

THE END

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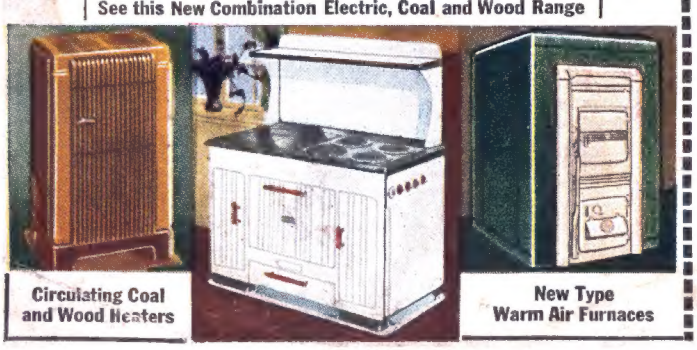

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